

Youth, Power and Social Media in Cuba

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

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. **This report argues that the two realities are linked:** 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 are direct causes of the demographic hollowing-out that official and international projections anticipate. The Cuban State has turned the expulsion of its youth into policy, and that policy carries a cost that official statistics can no longer conceal.

KEY FIGURES

1,339 political prisoners Human rights monitors, Aug. 2026 · highest figure in decades · 155 women	38 detained as minors 14 still minors · the Attorney General acknowledged 55 defendants aged 16–18 over 11J	–245,264 net migration in 2025 ONEI · –313,414 inhabitants in one year · over 1 million emigrants since 2021 (ECLAC)	1.29 children per woman ONEI 2025 · lowest since 1958 · 26.7% aged 60 or over	30.2% of the population aged 65+ in 2050 ECLAC · the most aged country in the region · ONEI: 35.9% aged 60+
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THE REPRESSIVE CIRCUIT



TWELVE DOCUMENTED PATTERNS

- 1 Prohibition of association by legal design.** No legal avenue to organize; the UJC and FEU as structures of enrolment and surveillance, not representation.
- 2 Disconnection of the communications network.** The State telecommunications monopoly duplicates lines, seizes accounts and cuts the internet at the exact moment of a call to gather.
- 3 Criminalization of freedom of expression on social media.** Surveillance from the age of 15, even for religious content, with no call to action and no political content.
- 4 The interrogation presented as an "interview".** Summonses without guarantees to recruit informants among mothers, siblings and friends and to induce self-censorship.
- 5 The use of law as a weapon against rights.** Fabricated cases (art. 393), habeas corpus blocked by police cordon, complaint channels that feed counter-intelligence.
- 6 Prison as an instrument of breaking and punishment.** Psychological torture at Villa Marista, humiliating searches, tolerated or induced sexual violence against political prisoners.
- 7 Prosecution and imprisonment of minors on political grounds.** Age of criminal responsibility of 16; adolescents tried for sedition and held in adult prisons.
- 8 Use of the family as a form of coercion.** The family as hostage: summonses, acts of repudiation, workplace pressure, exclusion of younger siblings from school.
- 9 School and work as apparatus of control.** Expulsion from universities and from State and private employment; forced dependence on pressured families.
- 10 Covert banishment.** The choice between prison and exile, release conditional on leaving the country, and the "regulation" of those who stay.
- 11 Transnational repression.** Surveillance, defamation, death threats, induced expulsions and assaults in at least five countries.
- 12 The engineering of distrust.** Infiltration, selective punishment and defamation to prevent the bond: the target is not the individual but association itself.

GENERATION Z AND POWER: A TWO-WAY RELATIONSHIP

HOW YOUNG PEOPLE PERCEIVE POWER

- **A State without limits.** Article 5 of the Constitution, read aloud to the Rapporteur as proof: "they own this country as if it were their private estate". As long as articles 4 and 5 stand, no implementing law can be considered progress.
- **A chain of command, not a system of justice.** Court, prosecutor and lawyers answer "to the party and to the intelligence organ".
- **An exhausted narrative.** Revolutionary language is a foreign tongue; the flag, "turned into a symbol of obedience", is reclaimed as their own.
- **Life on pause.** "Our life hasn't started until we go to another country or until this changes."
- **A generation stopped in time.** "We are more like the millennials of other countries: I wasn't born with the internet."

For the moment — I say for the moment because that will change — social networks are our only platform. There is no other platform.

Former political prisoner of 11J, consultation of 28 April 2026

HOW POWER PERCEIVES YOUNG PEOPLE

- **As a suspect subject.** Surveillance before any act: at 15 for religious content, at pre-university for refusing an act of repudiation. "Persons of interest" with a psychological "profile".
- **As a risk of contagion.** What is pursued is the capacity to convene: "for them a murderer is less dangerous than a person with a different opinion".
- **As a surplus population.** Power has learned to prefer departure to prison: expulsion carries a lower international cost and produces the same silence.
- **As an uncomfortable mirror.** The online life of the elite — including descendants of the regime's founding family — displays a privilege that fractures its legitimacy before its own generation.

They know that when we unite, that is the only way we are going to defeat them.

11J protester in exile, consultation of 9 June 2026

The demographic equation. Cuba was the first country in the region where people over 60 equalled those under 15 (2011). In 2025 there were 68,064 births against 136,214 deaths; the median age is 43 and the country lost 1.26 million people of working age in five years (ONEI). ECLAC projects that in 2050 Cuba will be the most aged country in Latin America and the Caribbean (30.2% aged 65 or over, ahead of Chile and Costa Rica); ONEI estimates more than 35% aged 60 or over. No projection fully incorporates the emigration of the last five years, which is selectively young. **The policy of banishment carries a documented demographic cost: the repression of youth and the ageing of the country are two faces of the same process.**

MAIN CONCLUSIONS

- Cuban youth exercises its rights in the only conditions the State leaves it: outside the law and, for the most part, online. The digital space is the de facto associative space of a generation and, for that very reason, the main target of repression.
- The State telecommunications monopoly is the material infrastructure of the denial of the right of assembly and association: the operational integration between the State operator and the political police must be treated as a central finding in the examination of digital surveillance.
- The harm is aggravated by reason of age: an age of criminal responsibility of 16, interrupted education and departure from the country without resources. Transnational repression is documented in at least five countries.
- Youth is not a passive victim: it maintains transnational networks of protection, information and civic action, and it is the generation with which any future transition will have to reckon.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Member States of the United Nations

- Take into account, in the election to 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 fourth UPR cycle's recommendations.
- Raise in the General Debate the situation of young political prisoners, including those detained as minors; recognize selective connectivity cut-offs and account seizure as forms of suppression of the right of assembly.
- Treat the systematic expulsion of youth as a causal factor in demographic collapse; make any dialogue or cooperation conditional on verifiable progress on freedom of association, assembly, demonstration and participation, the release of political prisoners and the end of banishment.

To the Human Rights Council, its special procedures and receiving States

- Incorporate transnational repression against young Cubans into the Rapporteur's thematic report on exile, with joint communications from the mandates on defenders, torture, expression, religion and judicial independence and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.
- Bring the Cuban case before the Human Rights Committee (General Comment No. 38, art. 22 ICCPR) and the Committee on the Rights of the Child; recognize transnational youth networks of mutual protection as a legitimate exercise of the right of association.
- Guarantee international protection and non-refoulement for persecuted young people; investigate threats and assaults against exiles; refuse any migratory or police cooperation that serves as a vehicle for transnational repression.