

# CUBA COUNTRY PROFILE

## INTRODUCTION

The recorded history of Cuba began on October 28, 1492, when Christopher Columbus sighted the island during his first voyage of discovery and claimed it for Spain. Since its occupation and settlement in 1511, Cuba remained a Spanish possession until 1898 (except for eleven months during the 1762–63 English takeover of Havana), ruled by a colonial governor, first in Santiago and later in Havana. Since the late eighteenth century, Cuba's economy relied increasingly on plantation agriculture and the export of sugar, coffee, and tobacco to Europe and North America. The massive importation of African slaves bolstered the island's economy throughout the nineteenth century.

Cuba's proximity to the United States has been a powerful influence in its history. The U.S. government attempted to annex or purchase the island from the Spanish government throughout the nineteenth century. Spain, however, refused to cede one of its two last possessions in the Americas.

The first major armed rebellion against Spain resulted in the Ten Years' War (1868–78). The Spanish government finally abolished slavery in Cuba in 1886. Rebellion against Spain broke out again in April 1895, and the United States intervened in the armed conflict after the explosion of the USS *Maine* in Havana Harbor in April 1898.

Cuba gained formal independence on May 20, 1902. The United States ended the military occupation and the young republic emerged under the presidency of Tomás Estrada Palma, a hero of the War of Independence. The next military occupation, predicated upon the Platt Amendment, lasted from 1906 to 1909 under a provisional government. The United States intervened in Cuba again in 1912 and 1917–22.

Political turmoil ensued during the dictatorship of Gerardo Machado (1929–33), ended by the first of several coup d'états that eventually led to what some historians call "the Age of Democracy" in Cuba (1940–52). The 1940 Constitution included a wide range of social, economic, and political reforms such as the creation of a minimum wage and extended social security benefits. In 1952, General Fulgencio Batista deposed President Carlos Prío Socarrás, canceled the constitution, and suspended elections.

Fighting in the eastern mountains of the island since 1956, Fidel Castro's guerrillas mounted a counteroffensive against the Batista dictatorship. Following Batista's flight from the island, Castro and his guerrillas entered Havana triumphantly on January 8, 1959. Soon after, Cuba turned to the Soviet Union for support after the U.S. government imposed an embargo on the island. In 1961, the U.S. and Cuba severed diplomatic relations and the U.S.-backed Bay of Pigs invasion failed. Antagonism between the two countries escalated during the Missile Crisis in 1962, resolved by an agreement between the USSR and the U.S.

The trade embargo continues to be the linchpin of the U.S.-Cuba relationship. Whereas some U.S. administrations have relaxed the more stringent prohibitions to allow the purchasing and shipping of food and medicine, others have curtailed humanitarian and cultural exchanges as well as family visits to Cuba.

Fidel Castro held effective power until July 2006, when he temporarily handed over his duties to his brother Raúl Castro, due to medical reasons. Cuba's National Assembly elected Raúl Castro president in February 2008.

In December 2014, Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro announced that they would take steps to resume diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba. The two countries reopened embassies in their respective capitals in July 2015. However, a series of attacks of an unknown nature against U.S. diplomats and their families in Havana chilled U.S.-Cuba relations under President Donald Trump's administration in 2017.

In April 2018, the National Assembly of People's Power selected Miguel Díaz-Canel as president of Cuba, but Raúl Castro remained first secretary of the Communist Party. In July, the Cuban government proposed the draft of a new constitution, which was approved in a referendum in February 2019. Castro resigned as first secretary of Cuba's Communist Party in April 2021, and Díaz-Canel assumed that position.

In July 2021, thousands of Cubans took to the streets to protest the scarcity of medicine, food, fuel, and other basic necessities on the Island, as well as to demand freedom and criticize the communist government. The Biden administration expressed its support of people's right to demonstrate peacefully and condemned the Cuban government's violent response to the protests.

(Portions of this text were adapted from the entry on "Cuba" for the *New World Encyclopedia*.)

**Main Sources of Statistical Information:** Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook* (2021); Cuba, Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas e Información, *Estadísticas de Cuba* (2021).

## **GEOGRAPHY**

The Republic of Cuba consists of the island of Cuba, the Isle of Youth, and more than 1,600 adjacent keys and small islands. The archipelago lies west of the northern Caribbean Sea, east of the Gulf of Mexico and west of the Atlantic Ocean. Cuba is located south of the eastern United States and the Bahamas, west of the Turks and Caicos Islands

and Haiti, east of Mexico, and north of the Cayman Islands and Jamaica. It is 150 km (93.3 mi) south of Key West, Florida.

**Geographic Coordinates:** 21 30 N, 80 00 W

### **Surface Area**

Total: 110,860 km<sup>2</sup> (42,803 mi<sup>2</sup>)

Land: 109,884 km<sup>2</sup> (42,426 mi<sup>2</sup>)

### **Forest Area**

32,536 km<sup>2</sup> (12,562 mi<sup>2</sup>, 2016)

### **Agricultural Land**

Three-quarters of Cuba's land area are fertile, with enough naturally occurring water to allow for intensive cultivation. The soil is mostly red clay with some sand and limestone hills.

### **Land Use**

Arable land: 2,989.4 (1000 ha) (28.7% of total land area)

Land under permanent crops: 482.4 (1000 ha) (4.8%)

Irrigated land: 560 (1000 ha) (2016)

### **Topography**

Cuba has three major mountain ranges: the Sierra de los Órganos in the west, the Sierra de Trinidad-Escambray Mountains in the south-central region, and the Sierra Maestra in the east, which contains the Turquino Peak, Cuba's tallest mountain at 1,974 m (6,476 feet) above sea level.

**Coastline**—5,746 km (3,570.4 mi)

Cuba's coastline to the north has deep harbors, coral lowlands, and white, sandy beaches. The southern shore has coral islands, reefs, and swamps. The largest harbors are in Havana, Matanzas, Cienfuegos, Nuevitás, Guantánamo, and Santiago de Cuba.

### **Rivers**

Of Cuba's 200 rivers, only two are navigable. The Cauto, located in the southeast and 240 km (149.1 mi) long, provides only 120 km (74.5 mi) of transport waterway. The Sagua la Grande, in central Cuba, is large enough to provide hydroelectric power and is

navigable for short stretches. The rest of the rivers are small and shallow, but several are internationally known for their fishing.

## **Climate**

The island has a tropical climate, moderated by trade winds and the surrounding waters; however, the warm temperatures of the Caribbean Sea and the fact that Cuba itself almost completely blocks access to the Gulf of Mexico, make Cuba prone to frequent hurricanes. The dry season lasts from November to April; the rainy season from May to October. The average temperature is 21 °C (70 °F) in January and 27 °C (81 °F) in July.

## **Natural Resources**

Cobalt, nickel, iron ore, chromium, copper, salt, timber, silica, petroleum, arable land

## **Environment**

Current issues: air and water pollution; biodiversity loss; deforestation

International agreements: Antarctic treaty, biodiversity, climate change, climate change (Kyoto Protocol), desertification, endangered species, environmental modification, hazardous wastes, Law of the Sea, marine dumping, ozone layer protection, ship pollution, wetlands

Signed but not ratified: marine life conservation

## **Major Cities**

Havana, Santiago de Cuba, Camagüey, Holguín, Santa Clara, Guantánamo, Bayamo, Las Tunas, Cienfuegos, Pinar del Río, Matanzas, Ciego de Ávila, Sancti Spíritus, Manzanillo, Cárdenas, Palma Soriano

**Capital:** Havana

## **PEOPLE**

### **Population**

Total population: 11,032,343 (2021 est.)

Urban: 77.3%

Rural: 22.7%

Density: 102 persons/km<sup>2</sup> (264 persons/mi<sup>2</sup>)

Growth:  $-.23\%$  (2021 est.)

### **Median Age**

Total: 42.1 years

Male: 40.2 years

Female: 43.8 years (2020 est.)

### **Age Distribution**

0–14 years: 16.3%

15–64 years: 67.9%

65 years and over: 15.8% (2020 est.)

### **Sex Ratio**

0–4 years: 1.07 males/female

5–14 years: 1.06 males/female

15–64 years: 1.00 males/female

65 years and over: 0.85 males/female

Total population: 0.99 males/female (2019 est.)

### **Race, Ethnic Groups, and Migration**

Cuba is a multiracial and multiethnic society with a population of mainly Spanish and African origins. Migration has had noticeable effects on the island's demographic history. Cuba imported more than 600,000 African slaves during the nineteenth century. Some 150,000 Chinese contract workers traveled to the island between 1847 and 1874.

Approximately 785,000 Spaniards and 311,000 immigrants from other Caribbean islands (especially Haiti and Jamaica) arrived in Cuba between 1902 and 1933. Smaller numbers of Jewish and Arab immigrants from several countries settled on the island during the first half of the twentieth century.

Between 1959 and 2019, more than 1.7 million Cubans have moved to the United States and Puerto Rico. At least 300,000 more have settled in other countries such as Spain, Mexico, and Venezuela.

According to the 2012 census, the racial composition of Cuba's population was as follows:

- White: 64.1%
- Mixed (*mestizo/mulato*): 26.6%
- Black: 9.3%

**Language:** Spanish

## **Religion**

Catholicism was Cuba's official religion since the Spanish conquest and colonization in the sixteenth century. Church and State have been constitutionally separated only since the beginning of the twentieth century. In the 1950s, 85% of all Cubans were nominally members of the Roman Catholic Church, but only about 10% were practicing Catholics.

In 1961, Cuba officially became an atheistic state and restricted religious practices. Although the 1992 constitution redefined Cuba as a secular state that recognizes the right of citizens to freedom of religion, the government, through the Ministry of the Interior, engages in active efforts to control and monitor religious institutions.

Nevertheless, the island's population practices many religions reflecting diverse cultural traditions. Catholicism is the most prevalent professed faith. In 2009, the Catholic Church estimated that 60% of the Cuban population was Catholic, but only 5% regularly attended Mass. Popular religiosity largely consists of syncretic practices of various kinds, such as *Santería* or *Regla de Ocha*, a mixture of Catholic and African beliefs.

Approximately 5% of the Cuban population belongs to various Protestant denominations, including Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists, and Methodists. Other groups include Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Jews, Greek and Russian Orthodox, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Mormons.

## **HEALTH**

The Cuban government assumes full responsibility for the health care of its citizens. In 1983, it adopted the Public Health Law, which lays out the general activities to protect the health of Cuban citizens and guarantees the right to free health care. The National Health System is organized at three levels (national, provincial, and municipal), which mirror the country's administrative structure. Cuba's state budget subsidizes its health system.

### **Life Expectancy at Birth**

Total population: 79.4 years

Male: 77.0 years

Female: 81.8 years (2021 est.)

**Birth Rate:** 10.25 births/1,000 persons (2021 est.)

**Death Rate:** 9.22 deaths/1,000 persons (2021 est.)

## **Infant Mortality Rate**

Total: 4.19 deaths/1,000 live births (2021 est.)

Male: 4.72 deaths/1,000 live births

Female: 3.63 deaths/1,000 live births

**Total Fertility Rate:** 1.71 children born per woman (2021 est.)

## **Other Health Indicators**

Physicians per 1,000 inhabitants: 8.67 (2019)

HIV/AIDS adult prevalence rate: 0.3% (2019)

HIV/AIDS—people living with HIV/AIDS: 26,952 (2019)

HIV/AIDS—deaths: <500 (2019 est.)

## **EDUCATION**

Cuba has had one of the highest rates of schooling and literacy in Latin America, before and after the Revolution. All education is free of charge to Cuban citizens, including university education. Private educational institutions are not permitted. School attendance is compulsory from ages six to sixteen.

**School Enrollment (Primary):** 96.9%

Male: 97%

Female: 96.8% (2017)

**School Enrollment (Secondary):** 92.1%

Male: 92.2%

Female: 91.9% (2013)

**School Enrollment (Tertiary):** 40.8%

Male: 30.1%

Female: 51.2% (2017)

## **Literacy Rate**

(Persons aged fifteen and over who can read and write)

Total population: 99.8%

Male: 99.9%

Female: 99.8% (2015 est.)

## **ECONOMY**

The Cuban government continues to adhere to socialist principles in organizing its economy and owns most of the means of production. The government imposed tighter state controls after some attempts at economic liberalization in the 1990s. While a policy of recentralization made it very difficult for foreigners to conduct business on the island, the reversion to a peso economy in 2004 adversely affected ordinary Cuban citizens.

Austerity and inefficiency in a state-controlled economy have created conditions for an informal economy, where perhaps 40% of goods and services operate. Since 2005, the government has implemented a campaign to combat corruption and recentralize much of the economy under the regime's control. In 2007, Raúl Castro began several economic reforms, including the promotion of self-employment and the transfer of lands in usufruct to stimulate agricultural production.

During the last decades, remittances have played a growing role in Cuba's economy. Although Cuba does not publish statistics on this topic, informed sources estimate that remittances reached \$3.716 billion in 2019, with most coming from relatives in the United States.

In 2021, the Cuban government eliminated its dual currency system, established in 1993, resulting in inflation and an increase in the cost of living. The island is currently experiencing its worst economic crisis since the early 1990s.

**Currency:** CUP (Cuban peso)  
1 Cuban peso = 100 centavos

**Exchange Rate:** 24 CUP = 1 U.S. dollar (2021)

**GDP (Purchasing Power Parity):** \$137 billion (2017 est.)

**GDP (Official Exchange Rate):** \$100.023 billion (2018 est.)

**GDP Growth:** -11% (2020)

**GDP per Capita:** \$6,530 (2020 est.)

### **Major Exports and Imports**

Exports—petroleum, nickel, medical products, sugar, tobacco, fish, citrus, coffee  
Imports—petroleum, food, machinery and equipment, chemicals



**Main Export Destinations:** Canada (19.4%), Venezuela (15.6%), China (15.2%), Spain (8.6%), the Netherlands (3.8) (2017)

**Main Origin of Imports:** Venezuela (18.1%), China (16.3%), Spain (10.8%), Mexico (4.4%), Brazil (4.2%) (2017)

**Inflation Rate (Consumer Prices):** 4.2% (2020 est.)

**Labor Force:** 4.585 million people (2019 est.)

State sector 67.1%, non-state sector 32.9%

### **Labor Force by Sector of Employment**

Agriculture: 18.3%

Industry: 8.7%

Services: 73% (2019 est.)

**Unemployment Rate:** 3.4% (2020)

**External Debt:** \$28.7 billion (2020 est.)

## **GOVERNMENT**

The constitution of the Republic of Cuba, revised in 2019, defines it as a socialist state. The current government assumed power by force on January 1, 1959.

### **Political Parties**

The Cuban Constitution defines the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) as “the organized vanguard of the Cuban nation” and “the highest leading political force of society and of the State.” No opposition parties are legally recognized in Cuba. The leadership structure of the Communist Party consists of the following:

- The First Secretary General of the Central Committee
- The Second Secretary General of the Central Committee
- Members of the Central Committee, including secretaries and presidents of political organizations

### **Executive Branch**

- Chief of State: Miguel Díaz-Canel, President of the Republic of Cuba (since October 2019; first elected as President of the Council of State and the Council of Ministers in April 2018)

- Vice President: Salvador Valdés Mesa (elected in April 2018)
- Prime Minister: Manuel Marrero Cruz (appointed in December 2019)

## **Council of Ministers**

The Council of Ministers is the highest-ranking executive and administrative body of the Republic of Cuba. Its membership includes the Prime Minister, Vice Prime Ministers, Ministers, Secretary, and other members established by law.

## **Legislative Branch**

The National Assembly of People’s Power has supreme legislative authority in Cuba. It currently has 605 members from single-member electoral districts who serve five-year terms. It meets twice a year for a few days each time. Between sessions, the Council of Ministers holds legislative power. The most recent municipal elections took place in November 2017.

The National Assembly of People’s Power elects thirty-one members of the Council of State and elects the Council of Ministers, the members of the Supreme Court, and the Attorney General Office of Cuba. The current president of the National Assembly of People’s Power is Esteban Lazo Hernández.

## **Judicial Branch**

The People’s Supreme Court is the highest body of judicial power and the court of last resort. The National Assembly of People’s Power elects the justices of the Supreme Court, who are not subject to a specific term. Provincial and municipal assemblies appoint lay judges in lower courts for five-year terms.

The People’s Supreme Court includes a president, vice president, and professional and lay judges in the following courts: the full court, the Council of State, criminal, civil, administrative, labor, crimes-against-the-state, and military courts. The current president of the People’s Supreme Court is Rubén Remigio Ferro.

## **Human Rights**

Chapter VII of the Cuban Constitution defines human rights as “fundamental rights, duties and guarantees” and outlines the rights to work, social security, protection, safety and hygiene, free medical and hospital care, free education, freedom of speech and press, rights to assembly, freedom of religion and conscience, and the right to legal defense. Despite these guarantees, critics have accused the Cuban government of numerous

violations of human rights since 1959 and of denying access to prisons to recognized human rights groups. The government places severe limitations on freedom of speech, press, and movement, and does not tolerate dissent.

### **Trade Unions**

Cuba has nineteen trade unions, with a membership of 82.7% of the island's workforce in 2013. All unions are part of the Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC). While supporters claim that officers are elected on an open basis and the membership can influence governmental decisions, opponents claim that the government uses the CTC to control unions while prohibiting the creation of independent trade unions and Cuban law does not recognize the right to strike.

### **Administrative Provinces**

Cuba contains fifteen provinces and one special municipality: Artemisa, Camagüey, Ciego de Ávila, Cienfuegos, Granma, Guantánamo, Holguín, La Habana, Las Tunas, Matanzas, Mayabeque, Pinar del Río, Sancti Spíritus, Santiago de Cuba, Villa Clara, and the Isle of Youth, the special municipality.

### **National Holidays**

January 1: Liberation Day

May 1: Labor Day

July 26: Commemoration of the assault on the Moncada garrison

October 10: Anniversary of the beginning of the first war of independence

December 25: Christmas (reinstalled in 1998 after Pope John Paul II's visit)

### **Membership in International Organizations**

ACP, ALBA, AOSIS, CELAC, FAO, G-77, IAEA, ICAO, ICC (national committees), ICRM, IFAD, IFRC, IHO, ILO, IMO, IMSO, Interpol, IOC, IOM (observer), IPU, ISO, ITSO, ITU, LAES, LAIA, NAM, OPANAL, OPCW, PCA, Petrocaribe, UN, UNCTAD, UNESCO, UNIDO, Unión Latina, UNWTO, UPU, WCO, WFTU (NGOs), WHO, WIPO, WMO, WTO

### **Major International Treaties**

Vienna Convention (ozone—1992); UNFCCC (climate change—1994); UNCLOS (LAW

OF THE SEA—1984); UNCCD (desertification); Ramsar Convention (wetlands—2001); Kyoto Protocol (CO<sub>2</sub> emissions—2002); CMS (migratory species treaty); CITES (species trade treaty—1990)

## **MEDIA**

The Cuban government owns and totally controls the island's press as well as radio and television stations. Cuba's major newspapers are published in Havana and include *Granma*, the official newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party, with several weekly international editions, available in English, Spanish, French, and Portuguese; *Juventud Rebelde*, the publication of the Union of Young Communists; and *Trabajadores*, the official organ of Cuba's Central Workers' Union. Magazines also published in Havana include *Bohemia*, published weekly, and *Mujeres*, monthly. Prensa Latina, the Cuban wire service, covers international affairs and distributes information throughout Latin America.

The Cuban Constitution stipulates that print and electronic media are state property and prohibits private ownership. Foreign news agencies must hire local journalists and only through government offices. Anti-government propaganda and insulting of officials carry prison sentences. Intimidation of journalists by threats of jail and loss of jobs is customary.

All telephone service is free. Cuba has three television stations: Cubavisión, Tele Rebelde, and CHTV, a subsidiary of Tele Rebelde. Radio stations are Radio Rebelde, Radio Reloj, Radio Enciclopedia, Radio Habana Cuba, Radio Progreso, CMBF-Radio Musical Nacional, and Radio Taíno. Cuba has two news agencies, Agencia de Información Nacional (AIN) and Prensa Latina.

In 2018, Cuba reported more than 6.5 million Internet users, but only about 5% of the population has unrestricted access to the World Wide Web.

## **MILITARY**

Under Fidel Castro, Cuba became a highly militarized society. The era of Soviet subsidies enabled Cuba to upgrade its military capabilities and exert power abroad. Since the loss of those subsidies in the 1990s, the armed forces have shrunk considerably in numbers and assets. Still, Cuba's Ministry of the Interior oversees a large state security apparatus to repress dissent and has formed special units to confront popular unrest. The military plays a leading role in the economy and manages many hotels in the tourist sector.

### **Armed Forces: Branches**

The Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) include the Revolutionary Army, the Revolutionary Navy, the Revolutionary Air and Air Defense Force, and the Youth Labor Army.

**Compulsory Military Service:** for persons 17–28 years of age; two-year service obligation; both sexes subject to military service

Updated in August 2021