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Protest and Punishment in Cuba: The Rise and Retreat of Civic Protest, 2020–2026

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Where demonstrating is a recognized right, exercised at lower risk and with firmer guarantees, though not always free from violence, the number of marches speaks to the vitality of public life. In Cuba, no law regulates and protects the right to demonstrate, and the Penal Code criminalizes protest as public disorder or as sedition (elTOQUE, no date a), with penalties of up to thirty years' imprisonment. Each demonstration therefore records, beyond an event, the decision of a number of people to bear a high cost, and the figures that follow should be read as the measure of how many were willing to pay it.

ACLED, the international database that records public, in-person gatherings of three or more people under a single criterion for all countries, counted 14 demonstrations in Cuba in 2018, 18 in 2019 and 48 in 2020. The figure rose to 154 in 2021 and to 211 in 2022, fell to 41 in 2023, recovered to 82 and 78 in the two following years, and reached 393 between January and 24 October 2026 (ACLED, 2026).

Cuban monitors, which work with sources closer to the ground, count considerably more, and Cubalex verified 766 protests in the first half of 2026 alone (14ymedio, 2026). The shape of the curve is nonetheless the same in every record. Protest grows, retreats and grows again, with each new peak surpassing the one before.

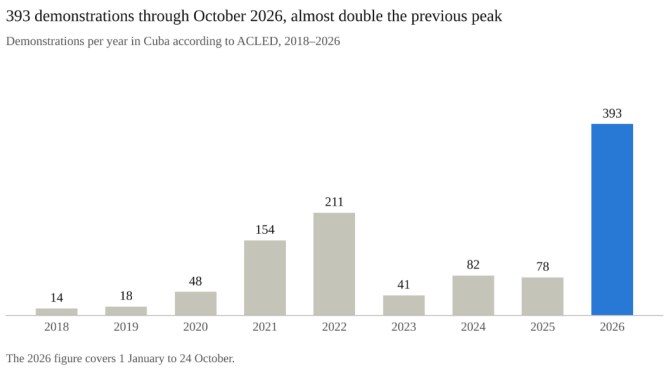

Figure 1. Demonstrations per year in Cuba according to ACLED, 2018–2026. Source: ACLED (2026), aggregated export consulted on 12 November 2026.

That alternation is better understood as the outcome of two processes of learning. The population has learned forms of protest it had not previously practiced, and the state has progressively shifted its response from prophylactic measures of prevention toward judicial punishment, which, although handed down months later, makes its effects felt everywhere from the moment investigations are opened, through the warnings and the criminal charges that invariably follow any demonstration contrary to the autocratic interest. The rises and retreats of protest can be read at the intersection of the two processes.

Erica Chenoweth, who together with Maria Stephan had demonstrated the advantage of peaceful campaigns over armed ones, warned in 2020 that this advantage was diminishing in the very decade in which more people than ever were taking to the streets. Chenoweth attributed the decline to two simultaneous changes, that of governments which had learned to anticipate protests, to infiltrate them and to divide them, and that of movements able to gather multitudes within days yet lacking the organization that allows them to be sustained (Chenoweth, 2020). Cuba offers an accentuated version of both, since no independent organization has legal existence there and the state's response has been refined with each cycle.

Albert Hirschman had described long before a third response to discontent, that of those who neither protest nor remain silent but leave, and Cuban emigration in these years makes it necessary to count it alongside the other two (Hirschman, 1993).

The studies gathered by Johanna Cilano, Inés Pousadela, María Isabel Puerta and Armando Chaguaceda in Activismo en contextos autoritarios, on Belarus, Egypt, Nicaragua and Venezuela, examine that same activism in regimes which, like the Cuban one, have withstood their protests (Cilano et al., 2024). ACLED's records, which apply a single rule across all countries, make it possible to observe those forces in Cuba year by year, and those of the Cuban monitors reach what that database does not see.

When the police killed Hansel Hernández, a 27-year-old Afro-Cuban man, in Guanabacoa in June 2020, the demonstration called for the 30th never took place, because that morning more than thirty activists were detained across the country and

as many again were kept under surveillance in their homes (14ymedio, 2020). The procedure remained effective as long as those who protested had known names, since it was enough to immobilize them in advance.

Five months later, on 27 November, some three hundred people, most of them young people from the cultural world, remained for hours outside the Ministry of Culture until they obtained a commitment to dialogue (France 24, 2020). The Ministry declared it broken within a week, yet it had been shown that a peaceful gathering was possible in Havana and that the preventive apparatus failed with those who did not figure among the watched.

While the Ministry held, a week later, a meeting with interlocutors of its own choosing, several of the participants in the sit-in had agents posted outside their doors (BBC News Mundo, 2020; on the surveillance of participants, see Aceprensa, 2020). The commitment to dialogue served to buy time and, above all, to identify. Those who on 27 November formed an unforeseen crowd became within a few weeks persons with a name, an address and assigned surveillance, that is, the kind of opponent the preventive apparatus knows how to neutralize. The state thus converted a protest it had been unable to prevent into a list of persons whom it could prevent from staging the next.

Rory Truex has described that logic in the case of China, where the authorities know in advance the dates around which dissent may be coordinated and detain dissidents before those dates arrive (Truex, 2019). The Cuban calendar also has its dates (28 January, 20 May, 11 July, 10 October and 10 December, among others), and the response of the organs of the Ministry of the Interior and of State Security conforms to that model. The limit of preventive repression lies in its need to know whom to detain and when, and it ceases to be of use when protest has neither a date nor a convener. What happened in the years after 2021 can be read as the tracing of that limit.

The first months of 2021 scarcely weigh in the statistics, since 95 of the 154 demonstrations that ACLED records for the whole year correspond to July. Their effect was of another kind. On 27 January, some thirty artists and journalists returned to the Ministry, and the minister himself swatted away the telephone with which a reporter was broadcasting live, before all of them were detained (Diario de Cuba, 2021a). On 4 April, the residents of San Isidro prevented the police from taking away the rapper Maykel Castillo and sang ‘Patria y Vida’ in the street until the patrol cars withdrew (CubaNet, 2021a). On 30 April, several dozen people gathered on Obispo Street to demand access to Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, on hunger strike under police cordon, and a journalist broadcast it on Facebook (EFE, 2021).

Timur Kuran explained the surprise of 1989 in Eastern Europe with an argument that suits this case, according to which, where dissent is silenced by fear, no one knows how many share it, and each visible act alters the calculation of those who witness it (Kuran, 1991). Those episodes, watched live thanks to a mobile internet that had existed in Cuba since late 2018 (AFP, 2021), showed that a minister could lose his composure before a camera, that a neighborhood could force the police to retreat and that a shared slogan existed.

Between 26 April and 2 May, Cubalex counted fifty detentions and more than fifteen house arrests linked to Otero Alcántara’s strike. Maykel Castillo was imprisoned on 18 May, and Otero Alcántara himself spent almost four weeks isolated in a hospital (CIVICUS Monitor, 2021). The Havana cultural nucleus, whose members were by then known, had been dismantled, watched and besieged before the summer. Had protest depended on them, July would have been a quiet month, and that it was not indicates that what had been learned in those months no longer belonged to them. It had been observed and absorbed by a citizenry that had followed and accompanied them in each protest and had drawn inspiration from the realization that protest was tangible and had a repertoire of possibility.

Material hardship, meanwhile, was growing in parallel. The monetary unification of January multiplied prices (Diario de Cuba, 2021b), and by early July the province of Matanzas had its hospitals overwhelmed by COVID-19 (Diario Panorama, 2021). The Observatorio Cubano de Conflictos, whose count monitors demonstrations of differing nature, recorded in June more protests over economic and social grievances than over civil and political rights (CubaNet, 2021c), the reverse of what had occurred in May (CubaNet, 2021b).

The two currents met on 11 July. The first demonstration was called the day before in a Facebook group of residents of San Antonio de los Baños in connection with the blackouts, it was broadcast live, and those who marched shouted ‘freedom’ and ‘we are not afraid’ (Reuters, 2021). A material grievance thus took on the form and the vocabulary put into circulation by a group of young people in Havana, whose most visible figures were at that moment imprisoned, detained or besieged.

The protests of 11 July (11J) carried protest to more than sixty localities (elTOQUE, no date b), and Justicia 11J has documented at least 1,597 detentions (Martí Noticias, 2025). The preventive method, designed for known activists, had no object when faced with demonstrators whom no one had summoned, and the state’s response moved from prevention to judicial punishment.

In March 2022 the Supreme Court reported sentences of between six and thirty years for 128 demonstrators from two

Havana neighborhoods, at a time when the government already acknowledged 790 persons charged, 55 of them under the age of eighteen (AFP, 2022). A sentence of that magnitude is not imposed on a neighborhood resident alone, and it may be read as the means by which a state no longer able to anticipate who will take to the streets raises, for everyone, the price of the decision to do so.

Sedition, which the Penal Code punishes with eight to twenty years' imprisonment, is an offense traditionally reserved for armed collective uprising against the state, and it was applied to participants in unarmed neighborhood demonstrations (Cubax-Cuba, 2026) who were party to no conspiracy and had never before taken part in a civil protest. The law that was to regulate the right to demonstrate was postponed in 2020, again in 2022, and finally excluded from the legislative schedule in force until 2027. That void performs an important function, because without a law stating how one may lawfully protest, every protest falls outside the law, and the criminal classification of each case depends on the decision of the prosecutor's office.

Human Rights Watch, which documented 155 cases of abuse after 11J, concluded that the violations followed patterns indicative of a plan to prevent protests, to punish those who took part in them and to instill fear (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The judicial route adds to that purpose something that direct violence does not offer. Fiona Shen-Bayh, in her study of political trials in African autocratic regimes, argues that the judicial process legitimizes punishment, deters future challengers and spreads a shared belief in the strength of the ruler (Shen-Bayh, 2018). In her analysis that recourse is reserved for rivals emerging from within the elite itself, whereas in Cuba it was applied to ordinary citizens, which gives a measure of the importance the state attached to what happened in July 2021.

Protests continued through 2022 despite the trials. More than ninety nights of marches and cacerolazos (pot-banging protests) provoked by the blackouts between July and October carried the ACLED series to its highest point before 2026 (CiberCuba, 2022; see also 14ymedio, 2023). Between 2022 and 2023 the ACLED series falls from 211 demonstrations to 41.

To attribute that decline solely to fear would be as partial as to attribute it to acquiescence. The country's official population shrank by some 1.7 million inhabitants in five years, to 9.4 million at the close of 2025, and close to 1.3 million of those missing were of working age (CubaNet, 2026a). Emigration removed from the country many of those who had the age and the motives of the demonstrators, and its effects acted upon protest in a way that the statistics of repression do not capture. To this were added the exhaustion that followed the outburst and the passing improvement in the electricity supply that had quieted the cacerolazos at the end of 2022.

Albert Hirschman studied the relation between exit and voice with reference to the German Democratic Republic, where for decades emigration to the West and internal protest were experienced as alternatives, until in 1989 the two responses to discontent began to reinforce each other (Hirschman, 1993). Cuba has known above all the first relation.

The title that Human Rights Watch gave to its report on the repression of 11J, Prison or Exile, names the dilemma offered to many demonstrators (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The departure of the discontented reduces protest without any need to repress it, and the decline of 2023 belongs in good part to that mechanism. Its reverse side is that emigration has a demographic limit, and those who protested in 2026 did so in a country that more than a million and a half people had already left.

The years of low figures did not return protest to the point of 2020. ACLED records 82 demonstrations in 2024 and 78 in 2025, well above the 48 of 2020, and the Justicia 11J program, applying a broader criterion, counted 290 between July 2024 and June 2025, spread across eighty municipalities, twenty-five of which had seen none since 11J (Justicia 11J, 2025).

The same organization's balance for 2024 includes 85 cacerolazos and 17 street closures (Diario de Cuba, 2024b), the forms of the summer of 2022. Protest was becoming less frequent and, at the same time, reaching places where it had not been seen, which suggests that those forms circulated through channels that do not depend on the intensity of the moment, and it may be supposed that conversation among neighbors and shared videos were among them.

The largest of the 2022 protests, that of Nuevitas, received its sentence twenty months later, in April 2024, with penalties of between eight and fifteen years for at least thirteen people (Diario de Cuba, 2024a). The notification arrived weeks after the demonstrations of March 2024 in Santiago de Cuba and Bayamo, and the convictions for the latter became known in September 2025, the same week in which 27 people were detained for similar protests in Gibara (Diario de Cuba, 2025). Its effect, even so, indicates that whoever protests knows the sentence imposed on those who protested before and still decides to assume the risk.

Protest returned in 2026 with a reach it had not previously attained. The energy collapse that followed the fuel blockade imposed by the United States at the end of January brought the cacerolazos back to Havana in February, and in March

The Observatorio Cubano de Derechos Humanos counts thirteen persons convicted and Diario de Cuba fourteen.

Cubalex verified 229 protests across every province, with slogans that moved from electricity and water to freedom and a change of system (Martí Noticias, 2026a). On 13 March, in Morón, demonstrators entered the municipal headquarters of the Communist Party (Associated Press, 2026). In June there was an average of eight protests a day and a maximum of 31 in a single day (EFE, 2026a).

The organization's half-yearly balance, with 766 protests in 141 municipalities, attributes 495 to Havana and describes a progressive shift from the periphery toward the center of the city. Those protesting were by now neighbors closing off their own street, and the forms learned in 2021 and 2022 were being used without any need for anyone to call them.

In 2021 protest had begun in a provincial town, and in 2026 it advanced from the outlying neighborhoods of the capital toward its center, where the institutions and outside attention are concentrated. The demand shifted as well, since it began with electricity and water and moved toward freedom and a change of system, and the entry into the Communist Party headquarters in Morón indicates to whom the demonstrators attributed responsibility for the shortages.The reports consulted do not attribute those protests to any organization. Anonymity, which makes them difficult to prevent, is also what leaves them with no one to sustain them when the cost rises, and it helps to explain why their end is as sudden as their beginning. Zeynep Tufekci has observed in other countries that protests coordinated through digital networks attain within days a scale that once required years of organization, and that such speed carries a cost, because they reach the street without the structures that make it possible to take collective decisions or to adapt to the government's response (Tufekci, 2017). The Cuban case accentuates that fragility. The organizations that could give continuity to protest lack legal recognition, and those who have tried to sustain them figure among the first to be reached by preventive repression.

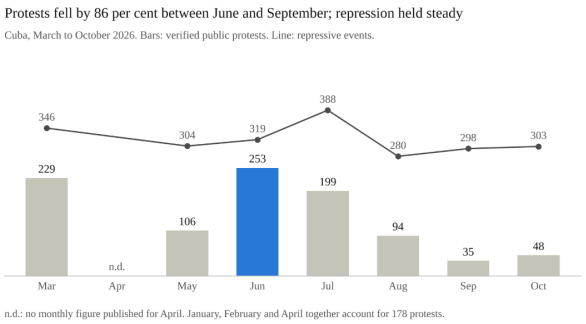

Figure 2. Protests and repressive events per month in Cuba according to Cubalex, 2026. Source: Cubalex monthly and half-yearly reports, March to October 2026, as reported in 14ymedio (2026), EFE (2026a, 2026d, 2026e), El Nacional (2026), Infobae (2026) and Martí Noticias (2026a, 2026b).

The Cuban retreat of 2026 took three months. According to Cubalex, monthly protests went from 253 in June to 35 in September, while documented repressive events held at around three hundred each month (EFE, 2026e). The conditions that had prompted the protest did not improve in that interval, since August registered record levels of electricity generation deficit and on 18 September the eighth nationwide blackout of the year occurred (Diario Las Américas, 2026). What increased, by contrast, was the cost of having protested.

The detentions carried out during the demonstrations were followed, weeks or months later, by summonses, fines and criminal proceedings, and incidents of arbitrary detention grew by 70 per cent compared with the previous half-year (EFE, 2026c). Cubalex itself cautions that its data do not by themselves allow the causes of the decline to be established, and the caution is pertinent, because alongside punishment there operated the weariness of a population absorbed by daily survival and the displacement of protest to the cacerolazo performed from inside the home, where the risk of being identified is lower (Martí Noticias, 2026c).

In June Cubalex documented slightly more than one repressive event for each protest, and in September more than eight. The apparatus did not reduce its activity when the street emptied, which indicates that by then it was no longer responding to demonstrations in progress and that its object was the people who had taken part in the earlier ones. For the events in Morón the prosecution sought up to thirteen years' imprisonment (CubaNet, 2026b).

In August most expressions of discontent were cacerolazos carried out from homes, with a maximum of sixteen on the 4th, after a new disconnection of the electrical system (Infobae, 2026). In October the prisons accounted for twelve protests, among them hunger and thirst strikes, and for half of the documented repressive events (El Nacional, 2026).

That displacement has a consequence for those who measure. ACLED defines a demonstration as a public, in-person gathering of at least three people (ACLED, no date), so that a cacerolazo performed from inside homes or a hunger strike in a cell falls outside its record, and its series registers seven demonstrations in September where Cubalex verifies thirty-five. The more effective the punishment, the more protest takes refuge in forms that international measurements do not capture, and the more its decline, seen from outside, resembles a pacification.

In October Cubalex recorded 48 protests, thirteen more than in September, among them seven on the 30th and a closure of Boyeros Avenue with refuse containers. The upturn is small, but it indicates that the forms of March and June remained available and that their use depends less on a call than on the occasion.

Measured with ACLED, Cuba's 393 demonstrations in 2026 amount to some 4.2 per 100,000 inhabitants, the same rate as Chile and somewhat more than the United States and Argentina, both at 3.8, and below Mexico, at 4.7, Bolivia, at 8.9, and Venezuela, at 10. Cuba is not, therefore, the country of the hemisphere where protest is most frequent. It is, among the twelve measured, the one where protest grew most in a single year, since it multiplied its 2025 figure fivefold, and it did so in a country to which Freedom House assigns 9 points out of 100 and the minimum score for freedom of assembly (Freedom House, 2026).

That a society without an effective right to demonstrate should equal the rate of another where demonstrating entails far less risk indicates how much people's disposition had changed. In Venezuela, after the capture of Nicolás Maduro and the easing of repression, the Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social documented 1,926 protests in the first quarter of 2026 alone, 144 per cent more than a year earlier, which suggests what becomes of protest when the cost of exercising it diminishes (La Estrella de Panamá, 2026).

The comparison probably understates the Cuban case. ACLED depends on what the media and its local sources publish, and in Cuba it records fewer than half of what national monitors verify, 293 demonstrations in the first half of the year against Cubalex's 766, so that its figure stands as a minimum. The CIVICUS Monitor classifies Cuban civic space as closed, the same category it assigns to Nicaragua and Venezuela (CIVICUS Monitor, 2025).

That condition affects both the possibility of protesting and the possibility that a protest will come to be counted. In Chile or Argentina a demonstration is announced, covered and archived, whereas in Cuba it is filmed on a telephone, uploaded to a social network and dependent on someone verifying it afterwards.

In June 2020 it was enough for the state to detain some thirty people for a protest not to take place. In July 2021 it needed close to sixteen hundred detentions, a figure that should be regarded as an undercount, and sentences of up to thirty years to close three days of demonstrations. In 2026, with at least 682 people in prison for political reasons according to Cubalex's verified list (Diario de Cuba, 2026) and with 1.7 million fewer inhabitants, there were protests in one hundred and forty-one municipalities.

Attention usually falls on the price paid by those who protest, yet these years show that there is also a cost for the oppressor, who must do ever more to obtain the same result, quiescence.

The rates per 100,000 inhabitants were calculated by the Observatorio de Protestas en Cuba (Cuba Protest Observatory) of Ciudadanía y Libertad on the basis of ACLED (2026); the rate for Cuba uses the official population of 9,434,593 inhabitants at the close of 2025 (EFE, 2026b).

The quiescence so obtained is no longer the same as before. Whoever keeps silent in 2026 has seen neighbors close the street and has heard the cacerolazos, and knows, with a certainty no sentence can revoke, that their discontent is not theirs alone. Punishment can postpone protest but cannot undo what has been learned, and each exemplary trial leaves in those who witness it, together with fear, the news that someone had courage.

A power that has only fear with which to govern those who have ceased to be unknown to one another ends up managing apparent calms that are ever more costly and ever more brief. Perhaps that is the reading of the curve, that the silence of the retreats resembles waiting more than obedience. Read as a whole, the figures that prompt these pages, beyond the observation of protest, measure the distance, ever greater, between what the Cuban regime can punish and what it is no longer able to prevent.

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