

# Pope Francis on the Release of Prisoners in Cuba

Isabella Rojas : 4-6 minutes : 1/21/2025

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Pope Francis described the recent announcement from the Cuban government regarding the release of prisoners as "a gesture filled with great hope," following an agreement facilitated by the Vatican. During the Sunday Angelus prayer at St. Peter's Square, the Pope addressed the congregation on this significant development.

"A few days ago, the release of a group of detainees from Cuban prisons was announced. This is a hopeful gesture fulfilling one of the intentions of this jubilee year," Pope Francis stated to those gathered to hear him. He also expressed a desire to see similar initiatives inspired in other nations over the coming months.

## Political Prisoners and International Reactions

The Cuban government has declared the release of 553 prisoners as part of an accord with the Vatican. This announcement coincided with the United States' decision to remove Cuba from its list of state sponsors of terrorism, following the Vatican's mediation. This is the first such announcement since 2019, when Cuba pardoned over 2,600 prisoners. Nonetheless, numerous human rights organizations have raised concerns about the process.

The Cuban Observatory for Human Rights (OCDH) reported that only between 40 and 50 of those released are considered political prisoners, with the remainder being common criminals. The OCDH argues that this disproportion could violate the agreements made with the Vatican. Additionally, the group Justicia 11J has criticized the lack of transparency in the prisoner releases and demanded that the Cuban government disclose the names of those released and the reasons for their incarceration.

"The trend is concerning," the OCDH stated in a communiqué, cautioning that individuals detained for exercising human rights may not be prioritized for release.

## The Complex Political and Social Landscape in Cuba

Prisoners Defenders documented that by the end of 2024, there were 1,161 political prisoners in Cuban jails, nearly half of whom were involved in the July 11, 2021 protests—the largest demonstrations against the regime in decades. The Cuban government denies having political prisoners, claiming that those convicted in relation to the 11J protests committed crimes such as vandalism and public disorder.

While the prisoner releases have sparked hope, questions regarding their scope and transparency highlight the intricate realities in Cuba, where political and social tensions continue to shape the island's daily life. In recent days, the release of political prisoners in Cuba has garnered headlines both domestically and internationally, stirring a variety of reactions.

The Cuban regime attributes its decision to a jubilee celebration, but it has been directly linked to an agreement following U.S. President Joe Biden's decision to remove Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. On January 15, the Vatican issued a statement expressing satisfaction with the release process, emphasizing the role of diplomacy in achieving the prisoner release, setting a precedent in international dialogues on human rights in the island nation.

On January 17, the regime reported that 127 individuals had been released, including both political and common prisoners, prompting criticism and accusations of manipulation from opposition groups and international observers. More recently, on January 20, it was confirmed that over 100 political prisoners have been freed, though official numbers remain contentious. The lack of transparency in the process has been pointed out as an obstacle to fully assessing the authenticity and impact of these measures.

## Understanding the Implications of Cuba's Prisoner Release

### **What prompted the release of prisoners in Cuba?**

The release was part of an agreement with the Vatican and coincided with the U.S. decision to remove Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terrorism.

### **How many prisoners were released by the Cuban government?**

The Cuban government announced the release of 553 prisoners, including both political prisoners and common criminals.

### **Why is there criticism regarding the release process?**

Criticism arises from the lack of transparency and the perceived disproportion between the number of political prisoners and common criminals released.