

Country Updates on Human Rights and Democracy 2017

Republic of Cuba

The situation remained stable without major changes in 2017. Continuation of positive measures on women, children and LGBTI rights was combined with stagnation or even setbacks in other areas.

Economic freedoms decreased during 2017, and so did the expansion of the private sector and the social empowerment it brings along. New restrictions on private sector activities started in July 2017, with the suspension of the issuance of new licences for self-employed and cooperatives in a number of key sectors, ostensibly to better regulate them. The move was followed in December by the announcement of overall tighter regulations as part of a review of market reforms stemming from complaints about excess accumulation of wealth, tax evasion and other practices. The effect of these measures will be further compounded by the prohibition, by the new US administration, of individual self-directed travel between the US and Cuba, since the private sector had benefitted the most from such individual visits.

A number of civil society organisations reported lack of progress regarding freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom of association. Limitations were reported in the activities of opposition, human rights defenders and activists ahead of the autumn 2017 elections. This translated in several of mostly short-term, but also a number of long-term arrests.

Municipal elections took place in November 2017, the first step towards the election of a new President by mid-April 2018. However, single independent candidates did not manage to enter the list of eligible nominees.

On the other hand, Cuba maintains its positive measures in addressing the rights of the child, women and of the LGBTI community, as well as the rights of people with disabilities. While the Constitution guarantees in theory a wide range of human rights, in practice there is an emphasis on protection of social and collective rights in Cuba. In this context, universal health and education continued in 2017 despite economic setbacks and a shortage of medicines linked to the US embargo.

EU key focus areas in Cuba include freedom of association, assembly and expression, promoting equal opportunities (with a view on gender, LGTBI, racism, functional diversity), promotion of economic rights, freedom of press and access to information, and empowering human rights defenders.

On 22 May, the EU and Cuba held their third high-level discussion on human rights in Brussels.

They included the subject of citizen's participation in public affairs, notably in view of the 2017/2018 elections in Cuba. The EU and Cuba reaffirmed their commitment under the EU-Cuba Agreement on Political Dialogue and Cooperation. The provisional application of the Agreement started on 1 November, officially establishing a legal framework to formalise the political dialogue between the EU and Cuba, and reinforcing cooperation in a wide range of areas, including in the area of human rights.

A number of successful EU projects have been implemented in 2017. They involve a total assignation of EUR 3,710,200, including projects addressing youth, people with disabilities, sexual health, healthy aging and a gender approach for the care of the elderly and people with intellectual disabilities. A new centre

in Old Havana was opened in November, in partnership with UNICEF, for the social and participative development of adolescents.

The moratorium on the death penalty remained in place in 2017, no new death sentences were pronounced and Cuba continued to abstain in the annual vote at UNGA. The EU engaged in constructive dialogue with the Cuban government on the subject, both in Havana and New York.

The next Universal Periodic Review (UPR) for Cuba was scheduled for May 2018.