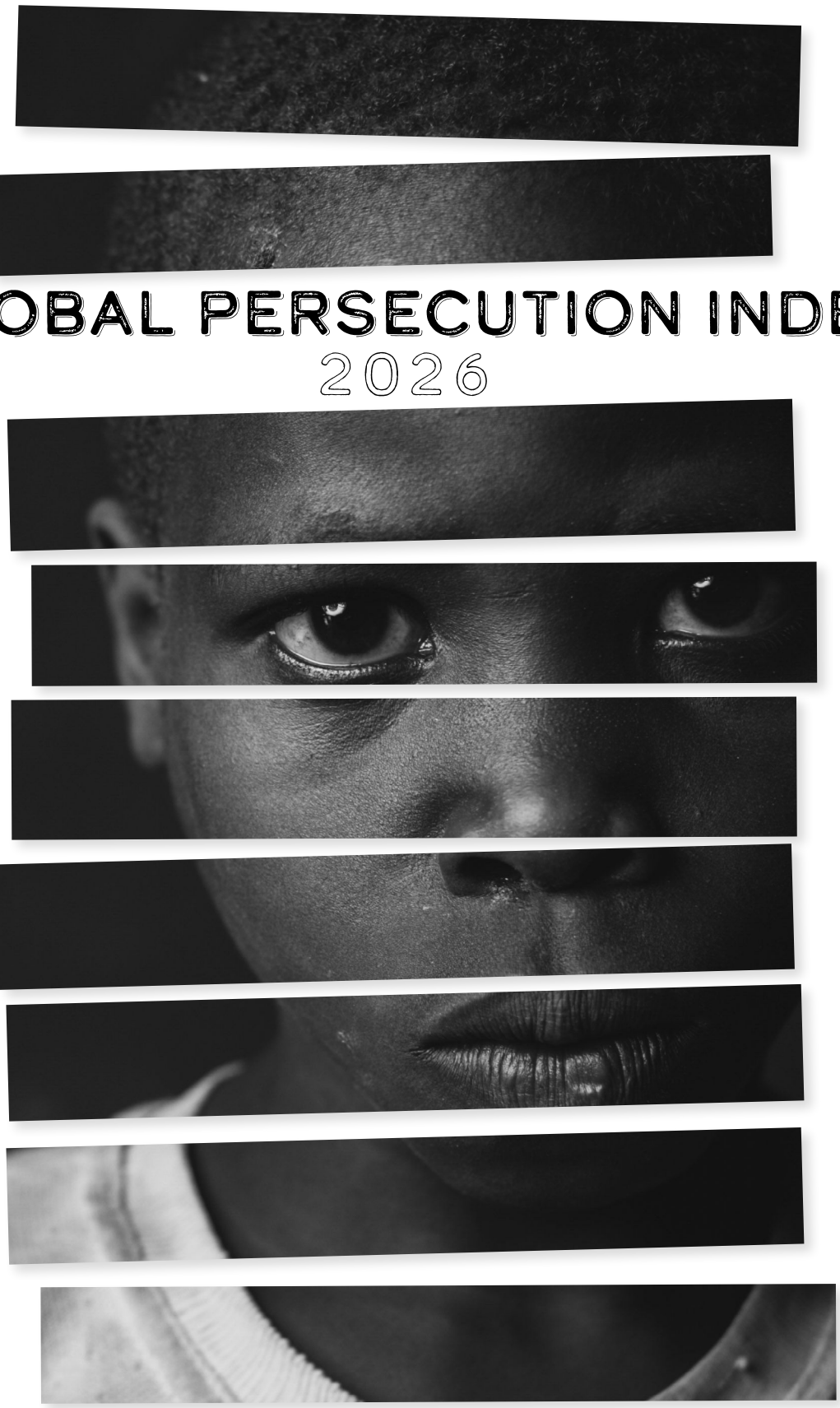


INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN



GLOBAL PERSECUTION INDEX 2026

EACH YEAR, AN ESTIMATED 380 MILLION CHRISTIANS AROUND THE WORLD ARE PERSECUTED BECAUSE OF THEIR FAITH IN JESUS. OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST ARE BEATEN, IMPRISONED, AND EVEN KILLED FOR THEIR FAITH. IN MANY COUNTRIES, IT IS ILLEGAL FOR THEM TO SHARE THE GOSPEL.

WE MUST STAND WITH THEM.



 @persecuted  @persecutionnews  @internationalchristianconcern  International Christian Concern

OUR MISSION: Since 1995, ICC has served the global persecuted church through a three-pronged approach of advocacy, awareness, and assistance. ICC exists to ease the suffering of Christians in hostile places and aid, support, and empower them as they boldly live out their faith.

DONATIONS: International Christian Concern (ICC) is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) (all donations tax-deductible). ICC makes every effort to honor donor wishes in regards to their gifts. Occasionally, a situation will arise where a project is no longer viable. ICC will redirect those donated funds to one of our other funds that is most similar to the donor's original wishes.



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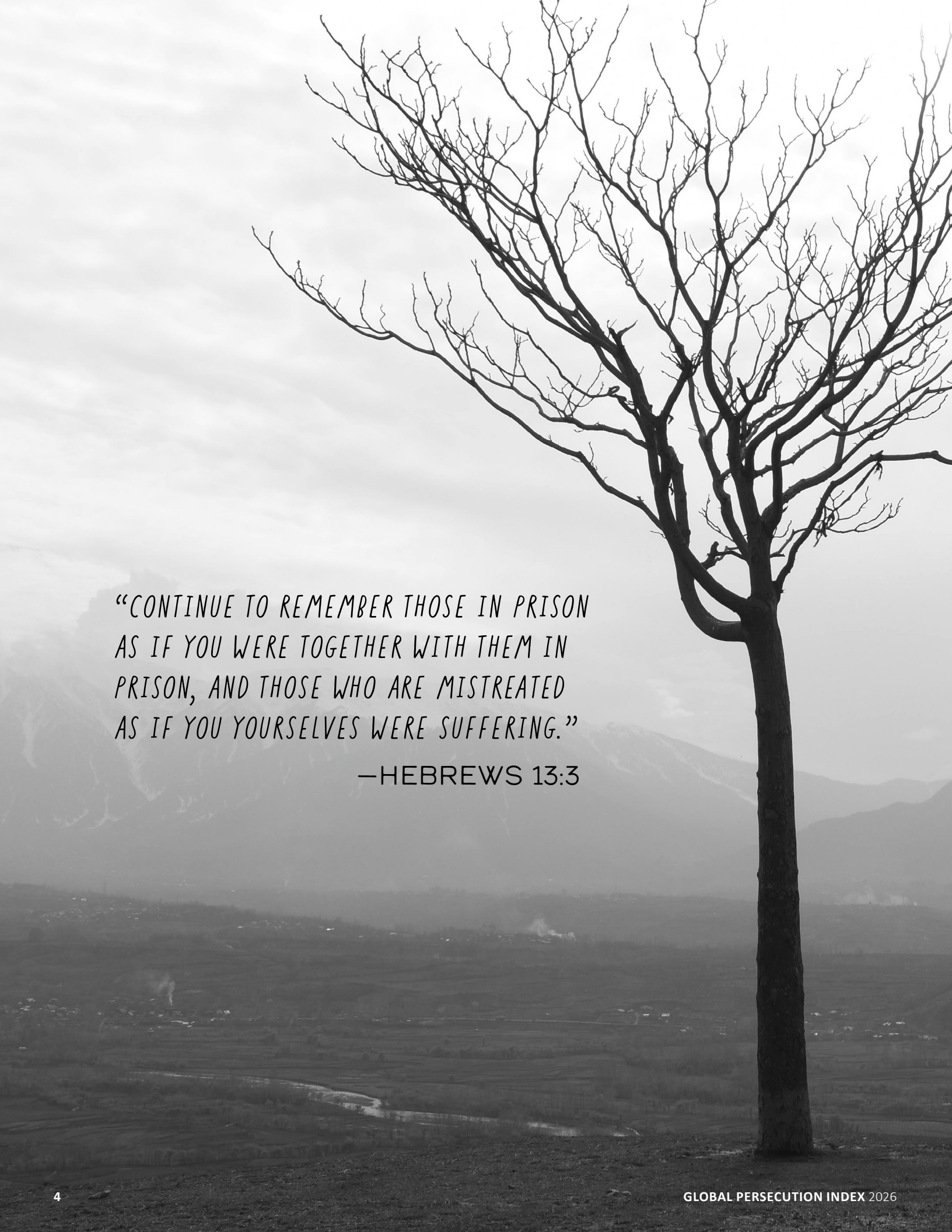
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A black and white photograph of a bare tree in a misty landscape. The tree is on the right side of the frame, with its branches reaching out against a cloudy sky. In the background, there are rolling hills and a valley with some small buildings, all shrouded in a light mist or fog. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

*“CONTINUE TO REMEMBER THOSE IN PRISON
AS IF YOU WERE TOGETHER WITH THEM IN
PRISON, AND THOSE WHO ARE MISTREATED
AS IF YOU YOURSELVES WERE SUFFERING.”*

—HEBREWS 13:3



WORKING TOGETHER TO STRENGTHEN RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

As persecution against our brothers and sisters in Christ continues to intensify around the world, I am deeply grateful to International Christian Concern (ICC) for its Global Persecution Index, which helps us grasp both the global scope and the complex realities within each region and country facing the most difficult conditions.

In addition to guiding our prayers for these persecuted communities, the Index also informs effective advocacy and practical support on the ground. While these Christians may be the focus of this publication, in their own countries, they often live on the margins of society and endure ongoing persecution. Our prayers, advocacy, and support are ultimately offered unto Christ Himself, who reminds us in Matthew 25:40: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

Working together to strengthen religious freedom conditions — both in these countries and globally — is urgent, for there can be no lasting peace or stability without religious freedom. Too often, governments need to be reminded of this truth. In pursuit of short-term political gains, they may overlook the deeper foundations of social cohesion and human dignity that religious freedom provides. This report helps us make that case with clarity and conviction.

I am deeply thankful for the work of ICC and for yet another excellent Index that equips us to better serve our brothers and sisters in Christ — and, in doing so, to honor Him.



Nadine Maenza

Co-Chair, International Religious Freedom (IRF) Roundtable

Former Chair, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

BRINGING CLARITY ON PERSECUTION TO THE GLOBAL STAGE

The pages that follow examine some of the most serious and accelerating threats to religious freedom shaping our world today. Scripture reminds us that persecution is not an anomaly but an expectation for those who follow Christ: “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12, NASB).

As we look across the global landscape, these pressures are not diminishing — they are intensifying.

One of the core roles of International Christian Concern (ICC) is to bring clarity to global persecution for journalists, policymakers on Capitol Hill, and peers in the religious freedom space. We also want those in the West to understand what is happening beyond their borders.

Many Christians live far removed from the realities faced daily by the persecuted Church. Through this 2026 Global Persecution Index, we aim to inform stakeholders and equip the Body of Christ so that believers can pray with understanding, engage wisely, respond faithfully, and remain alert to the dark forces shaping our world.

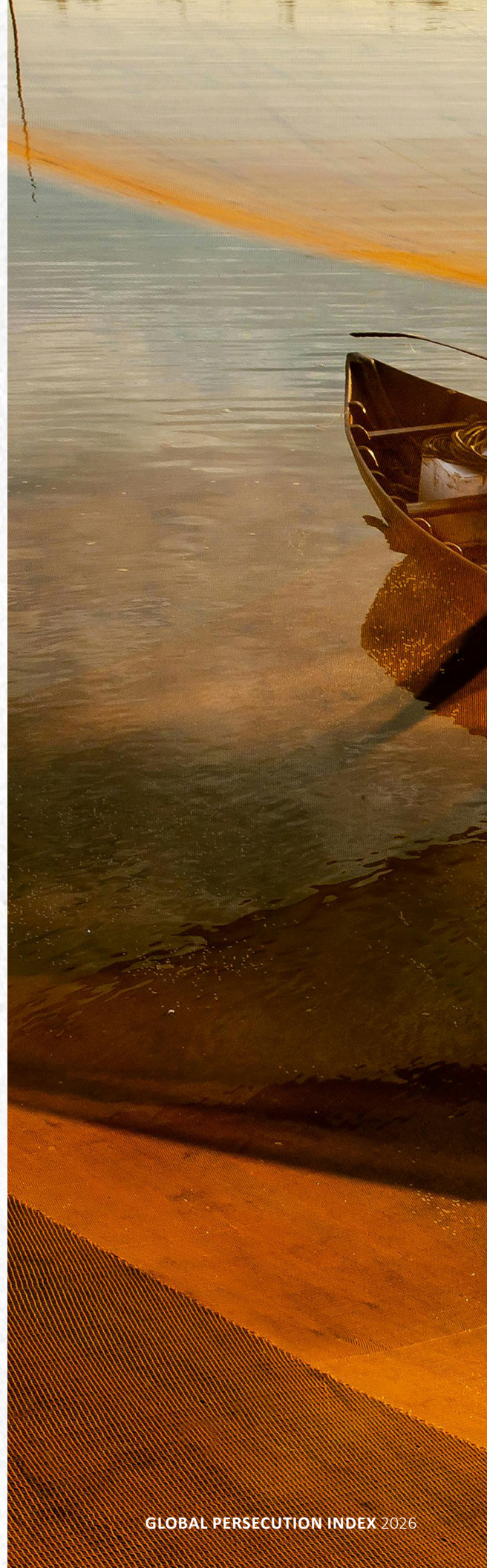
As a ministry, we are deeply concerned about the growth and spread of radical Islam and other hostile ideologies that seek to suppress or eradicate the Christian witness. We recognize that evil forces are actively working to oppose the Church and hinder the advance of the gospel. This report sheds light on the tactics, actors, and systems being used to intimidate, silence, and displace believers — often with devastating consequences.

These trends are not abstract. They represent real men, women, and children who suffer for the name of Christ. Scripture calls us to “remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them” (Hebrews 13:3, NASB). It is our prayer that this report will sharpen awareness, strengthen resolve, and encourage the global Church, along with policymakers and global leaders, to stand more faithfully with those who are persecuted.

Thank you for standing alongside the persecuted church as God writes His story through ICC.



Shawn P. Wright, President
International Christian Concern | Persecution.org



A fisherman wearing a red long-sleeved shirt and a traditional conical hat stands in a small wooden boat. He is pulling a large fishing net that is brimming with small, silvery fish. The net is draped over the side of the boat and extends into the water. The scene is set on a calm body of water during the golden hour of sunset, with the sky and water reflecting the warm, orange light. The fisherman's reflection is visible in the water. The overall mood is peaceful and industrious.

*"INDEED, ALL WHO DESIRE
TO LIVE GODLY IN CHRIST
JESUS WILL BE PERSECUTED."*

—2 TIMOTHY 3:12



GLOBAL TRENDS

Across the globe, religious freedom is facing mounting pressure from a convergence of forces. Governments are increasingly tightening their grip on religious expression — both within their borders and beyond — while transnational repression, displacement, and systemic discrimination continue to impact vulnerable communities, especially women. At the same time, global systems, including Western technologies and markets, are at times being leveraged to enable or sustain persecution. Despite these challenges, the church continues to grow in some of the most hostile environments, and resistance to repression is rising as individuals and communities push back against injustice and demand greater freedom.

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

Globally, growing religious nationalism continues to erode religious freedom. In India, militant Hindu groups aligned with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have targeted Christian and Muslim minorities. At the same time, local governments have introduced anti-conversion laws that criminalize basic religious expression. In Myanmar, Buddhist nationalism remains a central justification for the military junta's ongoing assault on ethnic minority regions, where entire Christian and Muslim villages have been destroyed. Across the world, religious conformity has become a dangerously important litmus test for national identity and belonging.

TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

Governments are increasingly pursuing religious minorities and dissidents abroad. Turkey has intensified its campaign against exiled critics and religious minorities, employing global intelligence networks to surveil and kidnap individuals living in exile. China continues to expand its transnational repression, targeting Uyghur Muslims, Falun Gong practitioners, and those associated with unregistered Christian groups overseas. Reports show Chinese agents pressuring foreign governments to repatriate asylum seekers and intimidating diaspora communities across Asia, Africa, and the West.

STATE CONTROL OF RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

Repressive governments are tightening control over organized religion. In China, regulations grant the state total authority over clerical appointments, online sermons, and even the design of church buildings. Registered churches are required to promote the Communist Party's ideology, while unregistered congregations face harassment and raids. Vietnam has expanded its system of registration and surveillance of religious bodies, forcing churches to operate within a rigid state-approved structure and arresting pastors who refuse to comply.

TERRORISM

In Africa, now the global epicenter of terrorism, jihadist violence continues to escalate. Groups such as Boko Haram, ISWAP, and al-Shabab have strengthened their networks across Nigeria, Niger, Mali, and Somalia, while the Islamic State group and al-Qaida affiliates expand operations into the Sahel region and central Africa. Thousands of Christians have been killed or displaced in attacks designed to eradicate the Christian presence from contested territories.

AUTHORITARIANISM

Authoritarian regimes view religious freedom as a direct threat to their survival. In Iran, the hard line clerical regime continues to imprison Christians, Baha'is, and Muslims who dissent from its ideology. The morality police have returned to the streets, enforcing harsh religious codes with impunity. In Nicaragua, the Ortega-Murillo government has escalated its campaign against the Catholic church, seizing church property, closing religious schools, and jailing clergy who speak against state abuses or dare to operate independently of government restrictions.

RESTRICTIONS ON WOMEN

In countless communities around the world, women in disfavored religious groups face especially severe restrictions on their rights and freedoms. In Afghanistan, women remain almost entirely excluded from public life under Taliban rule. Prohibitions on education, employment, and mobility have been enforced as religious decrees, effectively erasing women from society. In Egypt, Christian women face systemic discrimination in the workplace and justice system, where sexual violence and social persecution are rarely punished.

THE USE OF THE WEST TO PERSECUTE

Repression is increasingly globalized. Investigations have shown that Silicon Valley technology firms have supplied key hardware and software used in China's surveillance of Uyghurs, Christians, and other religious groups, effectively enabling religious persecution through Western innovation. Meanwhile, repressive states such as Iran and Russia have exploited Western markets and financial loopholes to circumvent sanctions, sustaining their security services and mechanisms for religious control.

GROWTH OF THE CHURCH DESPITE PERSECUTION

Despite mounting repression, Christianity continues to grow in unexpected places. The Iranian house church movement remains one of the fastest growing in the world, driven by underground networks and digital evangelism. In China, believers meet in homes and encrypted online gatherings despite constant surveillance, proving again that faith can endure even where freedom does not.

POPULAR DISCONTENT WITH REPRESSION

While authoritarianism remains entrenched, it faces growing resistance. In Myanmar, pro-democracy forces continue to challenge the military junta, often uniting across religious and ethnic lines. Turkey's opposition movements have defied crackdowns to organize mass demonstrations demanding free elections and the restoration of civil liberties. And in Iran, the courage of women and community leaders has fueled ongoing protests that expose the regime's moral and political fragility.

HINDRANCES TO RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE WEST

While Christians in Western nations don't experience the same horrific persecution that believers in other hot spots face, religious freedom in corners of the West is eroding.

The provincial secularism law in Quebec, known as Bill 21, prevents Canadian city workers from wearing religious symbols. Other laws dictate where and how Christians can pray and what they can share on social media. Several Christians were arrested for violating "buffer zone" laws for silently praying near abortion facilities. And growing Islamization in Europe encroaches on Christianity and other faiths.

International Christian Concern (ICC) has reported on ongoing hindrances to religious freedom in the West, including a teacher who was banned from working with children after telling a Muslim student that England was still a Christian nation (and won on appeal). Finnish parliamentarian Dr. Päivi Räsänen was charged with hate speech after questioning on social media the Lutheran's Church's support of a pride parade. Supported by ADF International, Räsänen's high-profile case has dragged on in the courts for years.

ICC has also reported the case of Rev. Dr. Bernard Randall who was fired from a Christian school for questioning the school's radical curriculum, and of Dr. Aaron Edwards, who lost his job as a college educator for posting a tweet that supported the biblical view of marriage.

ICC was heavily involved at the annual IRF Summit in Washington, D.C. for the past two years, where sessions focused on hindrances to religious freedom in Western societies. Groups such as Alliance Defending Freedom, Religious Freedom Institute, and Family Research Council helped paint a clearer picture of encroachments on Christianity.

In addition, the Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination Against Christians in Europe (OIDAC) published an annual report that documents attacks and hate crimes in France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, and Austria.

Pulling from police reports and its own statistics and findings, the nonprofit's 2025 report cited 2,211 incidents of crimes against Christians in 2024. OIDAC included personal attacks and church break-ins. There were 94 church arson attacks, double from the previous year, and most recorded in Germany.

INCIDENTS INCLUDED:

- In **November 2024**, a 76-year old monk was killed, and others were injured during an attack on a Spanish monastery.
- In **January 2024**, one man was shot dead in an ISIS-related attack during Sunday mass at a Catholic church in Istanbul.
- In **September 2024**, a historic church in Saint-Omer, France, was almost completely destroyed by arson.
- Another **Spanish case** where a court barred a father from reading the Bible to his son, granting the secular mother sole authority over religious education.
- A **French court** upholding sanctions against a teacher for using a text by St. Bernadette in a local heritage class, considered a breach of neutrality laws.



Friar Juan Antonio Llorente, killed in the attack on the monastery of Santo Espiritu in November 2024.



Ukraine | March 6, 2026: Hundreds of Churches Destroyed by Russian Forced in Ukraine



Finland | March 13, 2026: Platform Censorship Threatens Online Expressions of Faith



Hungary | Feb. 9, 2026: US, Hungarian Governments Launch Partnership to Combat Christian Persecution



Russia | March 27, 2026: Ukrainian Pastor Exiled from Russian-Controlled Region



Greece | April 16, 2026: Greek Catholic Churches in Belarus are Officially Liquidated



Russia | April 23, 2026: Preacher Found Dead in Russian Prison



United Kingdom | April 27, 2026: British Police Arrest Preacher



Russia | May 8, 2026: Russian Missionaries Arrested and Fined



Finland | May 15, 2026: Räsänen Appeals Finnish Supreme Court's Decision

REGIONAL OVERVIEW

ISSUES AND TRENDS IN

AFRICA

*"EVEN THOUGH I WALK
THROUGH THE DARKEST
VALLEY, I WILL FEAR
NO EVIL, FOR YOU ARE
WITH ME."*

—PSALM 23:4





Faith remains a defining force across Africa, where Christianity's rapid growth is matched only by the intensity of its opposition. From the deserts of the Sahel to the forests of the Congo, believers continue to face persecution at the hands of extremist militias, repressive regimes, and communities inflamed by religious nationalism. Christianity was introduced in North Africa by the apostle Mark and flourished for centuries across the continent. Today it finds itself again on the front lines of spiritual and political conflict.

Africa has become the global epicenter of terrorism. Nearly half of the world's terror-related deaths now occur on the continent, according to the Institute for Economics and Peace. This is primarily driven by groups such as Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province, al-Shabab, and al-Qaida affiliates operating across the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and elsewhere. These insurgencies target Christians as symbols of Western influence or obstacles to their extremist ambitions. Churches are burned, villages massacred, and clergy abducted. In places like Nigeria, Christian communities have been pushed from ancestral lands, while in Burkina Faso, entire regions have fallen under jihadist control.

Yet, violent extremism is only one form of persecution. In parts of East and Central Africa, governments have tightened restrictions on religious life, fearing that independent faith movements threaten their authority. Eritrea continues to imprison Christians in shipping containers and secret prisons. Ethiopia faces growing sectarian violence as religious nationalism intertwines with ethnic conflict. In Western Africa, 12 Nigerian states continue to enforce blasphemy laws, which criminalize unpopular religious expression.

Underlying these crises are familiar pressures — poverty, corruption, resource stresses, and weak governance — that extremists exploit to recruit the disenfranchised. As states falter, faith communities often become the last bastion of social stability, making them both indispensable and vulnerable.

International responses remain fragmented, with counter-terrorism often prioritized over protection of religious freedom. Still, the church persists. Across the continent, from Nigeria's Middle Belt region to the conflict zones of the Congo, believers rebuild burned churches and continue to worship even under threat of death. Their resilience remains a powerful testimony to the endurance of faith amid turmoil.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

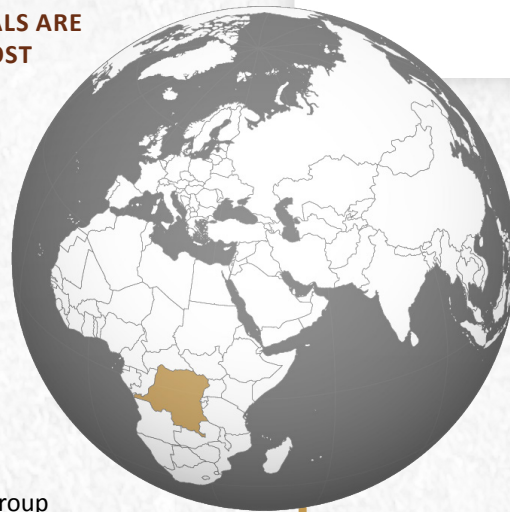
Allied Democratic Forces (ADF): Experts estimate that around 120 militant groups are active in the DRC, each with their own leadership structure, territorial objectives, and ideological motivations. In this crowded space, the ADF stands out for its Islamist motivations and intensely cruel violence against civilians. Founded in 1995, the ADF began espousing Islamist extremism from the very beginning. This motivation, however, seemed to wane over the years before surging again in 2019 when the group officially pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.¹ In 2020, leader Musa Baluku declared the dissolution of the ADF. In that declaration, Baluku renamed the group Islamic State Central Africa Province, though the old ADF moniker remains the more common way of referring to the group.

March 23 Movement (M23): Operating with financial and military backing from neighboring Rwanda, the M23 militant movement contrasts with the ADF in that it is a politically and economically motivated group rather than an Islamist one.² Still, its wide-ranging offensives in northeast DRC have led to mass destabilization, allowing extremist groups like the ADF to operate with greater impunity and making regular religious life impossible for the area's Christian population. A much-vaunted peace deal between the DRC and Rwanda in 2025 produced limited results in the months following, with M23's continued attacks suggesting ongoing support from Rwanda despite the deal.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Musa Baluku: Despite its strident Islamist rhetoric in the early years after the ADF's founding in 1995, that rhetoric faded as it focused on regrouping after losses sustained in the late 1990s and early 2000s.³ The group conducted relatively few attacks from 2001 to 2012, returning to the spotlight in 2013 after a series of brutal attacks that displaced more than 60,000 people.⁴ The increased activity brought increased government attention to the group, and ADF leader Jamil Mukulu was captured in 2015, allowing Musa Baluku to rise from the ranks of senior leadership to take his place.

Under Baluku, who was previously chief Islamic judge in the group's own Sharia court system, the ADF began releasing religious propaganda suggesting an increased alignment with the Islamic State, a specific effort to kill non-Muslims, and a general shift toward religious extremism within the group.⁵ This culminated in Baluku's 2019 pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State apparatus, an arrangement that continues to this day. Baluku is known for his love of violence and for personally presiding over the killing of prisoners by beheading, crucifixion, and firing squad.⁶



QUICK FACTS

Region: Sub-Saharan Africa

Population: 115.40 million

Religious Demography:

- 95% Christian
- 5% Muslim and other

Languages:

- French
- Swahili
- Lingala

“Terrorism is running rampant in eastern DRC, fueled by regional tensions and the Congolese government’s inability to effectively counter militant attacks.”

—ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

EXTREMISM

Groups such as the ADF have found that the widespread instability and deep poverty so common in the DRC made a fertile breeding ground for Islamic extremism. While the DRC itself is majority Christian, militant groups have been able to recruit disaffected young men from the DRC and elsewhere to join their fight. In fact, ADF founder Jamil Mukulu himself grew up as a Catholic Christian but converted to Islam when he turned 20.⁷ After 10 years of radicalization abroad, Mukulu returned to Africa with the goal of creating an Islamic caliphate, an extremist goal that lives on in his group even a decade after his arrest.⁸

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

DRC does not have an anti-blasphemy or anti-conversion law. Its population is overwhelmingly Christian, and the constitution protects religious freedom under the law. Still, these protections are inadequately safeguarded by the government, which is incapable of responding to militant uprisings within its borders. Groups like the ADF impose Sharia law in areas of its control, enforcing a strict religious code on those under their control.⁹

POLITICS

Decades-old political conflicts between the DRC and its neighbors, especially Rwanda, are a major driving force behind the death, violence, and destruction so rampant in the DRC today. Authorities in the capital Kinshasa have proven unable to effectively govern the country or secure its territory, and even the 2025 peace deal with Rwanda was an insufficient political development to stem the violence. While the DRC’s government may not persecute its people directly, its inaction and refusal to empower outside help, such as that offered by the United Nations, continues to facilitate persecution to this day.

EDUCATION

Violence and instability continue to threaten education in the DRC. School closures have followed major militia offensives in the eastern provinces for years, with families displaced or afraid to send children to classes near conflict zones. Church-run schools, which make up a significant portion of the education system, have been attacked or abandoned during raids. The loss of consistent schooling deprives families of both education and community stability, undermining long-term prospects and perpetuating cycles of vulnerability for the next generation.

REFUGEE + IDP CAMPS

About 7 million civilians are internally displaced in the DRC currently. Most of this number hails from the eastern provinces like North and South Kivu and Ituri, according to the United Nations.¹⁰ Camps that should provide safety have themselves become targets, as shown in the February 2025 attack on a refugee camp in Ituri. Christians, uprooted from homes and livelihoods, face poor sanitation, hunger, and exposure to militia raids even within supposed sanctuaries. These conditions magnify vulnerability, ensuring that displacement compounds persecution by stripping communities of security, dignity, and long-term resilience.

CITATIONS

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/who-are-islamic-states-affiliates-congo-uganda-2021-12-01/>
² <https://acleddata.com/report/resurgence-and-alliances-march-23-movement-m23>
³ <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-allied-democratic-forces>
⁴ <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/sanctions/1533/materials/summaries/entity/allied-democratic-forces-%28adf%29>
⁵ <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n21/113/46/pdf/n2111346.pdf?token=Xz5qgAwExGufAi27bH&fe=true>
⁶ <https://web.archive.org/web/20250318103318/https://insidetheadf.org/leadership-adf-bios/>

DESIGNATION

The Democratic Republic of the Congo has no official Special Watchlist of Country of Concern designation from the United States government.

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1

LEVEL 2

LEVEL 3

LEVEL 4

RECONSIDER TRAVEL in the DRC due to crime, and civil unrest. Some areas have increased risk due to armed conflict.
(As of Aug. 21, 2025)

BY THE NUMBERS

NEARLY
400

CHRISTIANS KILLED

Between July 1, 2024, and July 1, 2025

23

RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS
DAMAGED

94

ABDUCTIONS

72

ATTACKS ON
HOUSES

346

INDIVIDUALS
FORCED TO LEAVE
THEIR HOME

International Christian Concern (ICC) partners with the International Institute for Religious Freedom to support its Violent Incidents Database. These figures represent a small fraction of the larger persecution picture.

ICC NEWSROOM

Mother Killed, Baby Rescued Amid DRC Attack Nov. 24, 2025

Tragedy struck the Byambwe Hospital in the Democratic Republic of the Congo on Nov. 15, when armed fighters of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) stormed the facility that night.

Among the victims was a young mother who had delivered her baby three days earlier. She was murdered in the attack. Yet from this horror, another woman, who had herself given birth just one day before, risked her life to rescue the newborn.

Both women were recovering from their deliveries at the hospital, awaiting release after childbirth, when the attack occurred. The assault came suddenly as ADF fighters forced open hospital doors and began targeting patients indiscriminately.

“They entered the room next to where I was sleeping. I heard people crying as the pain of machetes cut through them,” recalled Anu*, the survivor who carried out the rescue.

DRC, M23 Rebel Group Agree on Initial Framework for Peace Nov. 20, 2025

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and representatives of the Rwanda-backed M23 rebel group signed a new peace deal in Qatar on Saturday.

While the agreement seeks to end the ongoing fighting in eastern DRC, where M23 has made significant military gains this year, many analysts fear it will have little impact on the ground.

Qatar and the United States, which mediated the latest round of talks between the DRC and M23, were quick to laud the “comprehensive” deal, pointing to it as a helpful roadmap to stop the extreme violence spiraling out of control in eastern DRC.

But rather than constituting a final peace deal, Saturday’s agreement simply sketches out several measures needed to reach one eventually.

“There will be neither any change in the situation on the ground, nor any activity whatsoever,” the head of the M23 delegation said after the meeting, “until the measures are debated, negotiated and discussed one by one and a final peace agreement is reached.”

To read more persecution news from the DRC and other regions, visit www.persecution.org

ADF Kills 5 in Rizerie Village, DRC

Oct. 9, 2025

The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) continue to cause death and destruction in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo. On Tuesday morning, Oct. 7, they launched a deadly attack on Rizerie village, located in the Babika chiefdom within the Bapere sector of the predominantly Christian Lubero territory, North Kivu Province.

According to local reports, the attackers arrived while people were working in a gold mining site. They killed five civilians who were actively mining gold at the time.

“The people who were killed were just trying to work so they could earn a living,” said a local source who witnessed the aftermath. “They woke up early that morning, hoping to provide for their families. Then the rebels came out of nowhere and brutally ended their lives. It was horrifying — gunshots, screaming, and people running in every direction. Those men didn’t deserve to die like that.”

After the attack in Rizerie, the assailants moved toward the nearby village of Robinet, where they encountered the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC) stationed in their barracks. Heavy gunfire was reported, though the outcome of the clash remains unclear. Residents nearby said the fighting sent waves of panic through the area as families fled into the forest for safety.

ADF Militants Pose as Church Leaders, Kill Three in DRC Aug. 30, 2025

In a chilling new tactic, alleged Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) rebels disguised themselves as church officials and choristers before launching a recent fatal attack on Mayi Moya village in Beni Territory, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The rebels killed three civilians and kidnapped eight.

The attackers reportedly began their Aug. 13 mission in Ngite village earlier in the morning, where they raided a church, stole clerical robes and choir garments, and posed as members of a religious delegation.

“They came into our church and stole the robes of our priests and choir; they then put them on, posing as a delegation from another church. It was a devilish plan. To use the very symbols of worship to deceive and destroy is beyond evil. My heart breaks for those who trusted them, thinking they came in peace,” one church official said.

CITATIONS

⁷ <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2014/01/27/adf-nalu-militia-drc>

⁸ <https://web.archive.org/web/20181203063940/http://congoresearchgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Inside-the-ADF-Rebellion-14Nov18.pdf>

⁹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20240610185749/https://insidetheadf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Inside-the-ADF-Rebellion-14Nov18.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.unhcr.org/us/where-we-work/countries/democratic-republic-congo>

¹¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/08/06/dr-congo-armed-group-massacres-dozens-in-church>

ICC AT WORK

- Emergency relief packages to Christian victims of violence, particularly those in marriages or families that do not support conversion from Islam.
- Community support for victims of violent attacks from the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and similar groups.
- Small business support. Most beneficiaries are Muslim-background believers (MBBs) who need a way to support themselves after being rejected from their families.
- Hope House schools and orphanages serve more than 450 children who have been orphaned or forced from their homes by jihadist groups. They receive holistic care through school curriculum, hot meals, and Bible classes.
- Sponsorships for 49 primary school aged students and 71 Generation Transformation programs across East Africa. These students are deserving Christians, and many have been orphaned.
- Gospel outreach in highly sensitive areas.

CONCLUSION

Persecution in the DRC has reached alarming levels. The ADF, aligned with the Islamic State group, continues to carry out atrocities of unprecedented scale, including the beheading of 70 worshippers in Kasanga and the massacre of nearly 50 Christians at a Komanda church vigil.¹¹

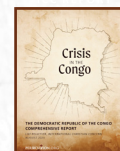
These events underscored a deliberate campaign of religious terror targeting congregations in sacred spaces. Alongside extremist threats, militant assaults on villages and IDP camps revealed how ethnic militias compound suffering for Christian communities, turning places of refuge into killing grounds.

The M23 rebellion is destabilizing the east, sparking political unrest in Kinshasa and undermining the state's already fragile capacity to protect civilians. With government institutions weakened, militias operate with impunity, creating zones where worship itself can be life-threatening. Women and children bear the brunt of this violence, whether as direct victims of massacres or as displaced survivors facing exploitation and deprivation in camps.

While the international community is coming to recognize the extreme danger posed by terrorism in the area, it does not seem to fully appreciate the element of religious extremism within these organizations. In searching for long-term solutions to terrorism in the country, it is important that the world address not just the economic roots of the insurgency but the ideological ones as well.

Whether through targeted information campaigns on the ground or specific efforts to protect religious communities in the DRC, it is vital that the world recognizes the persecution happening and addresses it accordingly. Only then can a workable solution be reached.

REPORTS



Crisis in the Congo *International Christian Concern*



2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Democratic Republic of the Congo *U.S. Department of State*



Inside ADF Rebellion: A Glimpse into the Life and Operations of a Secretive Jihadi Armed Group *Congo Research Group*



LEGAL TAKE

By ICC Human Rights Counsel

The DRC is a rare example of a nation where persecution can still flourish despite having a large Christian majority population. This is because most international analysts would agree that the DRC has become a “failed state.” A failed state is a country “where national sovereignty has collapsed and has been replaced by endemic chaos, tribal or clan leadership rivalries, and the absence of any clearly defined sovereign regime (U.N. definition).”

While the DRC’s government may technically exist, its failure to secure basic rights and functions to its citizens highlights the critical juncture between religious freedom and respect for the rule of law. Without stable government institutions that can both pass and implement just laws, de facto authority in any given country largely becomes a matter of brute force and contests of military might.

ERITREA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ): Eritrea is ruled by a single political party, the PFDJ, which has come to monopolize political power and is a prime tool for the enforcement of ideological conformity across the country. Chaired by President Isaias Afwerki, the party has dismantled independent institutions, prevented elections, and come to treat dissent as a threat to national security. Under the PFDJ's political monopoly, independent religious groups and conscientious objectors face harassment, arrest, and even torture.

Ministry of Justice: The Ministry of Justice operates the prisons and jails of the domestic police force, including a secret network of prisons used for political prisoners. It also works closely with the Office of Religious Affairs to regulate and control religious groups, all of which are required to register with the government.¹ Imprisonment and fines face those who dare to gather for religious services without government approval, with many prisoners held indefinitely without trial.²

Ministry of Defense: The Ministry of Defense operates a judicial system responsible for trying corruption cases and cases pertaining to national security, a broadly defined category of crime enabling the government to harass and abuse enemies at will. Judges within the Ministry of Defense system function as prosecutors as well — all but ensuring miscarriage of justice and convictions for those targeted, such as disfavored religious groups.

The Ministry also operates its own prisons, where prisoners of conscience — including pastors, worshipers, and conscientious objectors to military service — are routinely held, often under deplorable conditions.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Isaias Afwerki: Isaias Afwerki has led Eritrea since independence in 1993 and remains the central figure in the country's long-standing repression to this day. As president and chair of the PFDJ, Afwerki controls the party, state, military and security services; he has refused to implement the 1997 constitution, allowed no national elections since independence, closed independent media, and presided over an economy and political system centered on indefinite national service and centralized control.³

International monitors and NGOs consistently place Afwerki at the heart of policy decisions that result in arrests, long-term detention without trial for religious actors, heavy surveillance, and the seizure or takeover of religious schools and institutions. In 2025 his government sought to end a U.N. expert's mandate and has continued to resist outside scrutiny.⁴

Filipos Woldeyohannes: As head of Eritrea's military, General Filipos oversees the forces that implement indefinite national conscription, run military and security operations linked to internal control, and operate detention facilities where prisoners of conscience — including clergy, lay worshippers and political dissidents — have been held. U.S. sanctions designated Filipos in 2021 for his connection to human-rights abuses in regional operations; military structures under Filipos' command are central to enforcing the state's restrictions on religious practice.⁵

Because the Eritrean's military power reaches into everyday civilian life via forced national service, checkpoints, detentions, and occasional border operations, Filipos' leadership is a direct driver of the punitive environment that criminalizes independent religious practice and punishes those who step outside state-sanctioned bounds.

QUICK FACTS

Region: Sub-Saharan Africa

Population: 6.34 million

Religious Demography:

- 52% Muslim
- 47% Christian
- 1% Other

** Estimates of Eritrea's population vary by as much as 3 million, a result of the fact that Eritrea has never conducted an official census.*



“Despite being one of the world’s most tightly closed countries, Eritrea’s systematic and ongoing abuse of its people is too often ignored, conveniently dismissed as a niche issue in a far-flung corner of the world.”

—ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

NATIONALISM

National Eritrean identity is tightly coupled to the state and the party, and the regime interprets independent religious activity as a political threat. As is common in many communist-influenced states, the government views religious allegiance as a threat to its claim on absolute power and insists that all citizens demonstrate loyalty to the state over their personal religious convictions.

POLITICS

In the 1960s, President Afwerki traveled to China to study Maoism, returning with a determination to apply its methods in Eritrea. The country has maintained close ties with Beijing ever since, especially since Xi Jinping, whose leadership echoes elements of Mao’s authoritarian style, rose to power in 2012. Those who challenge the government face swift and harsh reprisals. Countless Christians and other people of conscience have been imprisoned for their faith, where they endure gross human rights abuses, including routine beatings, torture, and inhumane conditions in overcrowded detention facilities.

EDUCATION

Religious schools and faith-based educational institutions have continuously been targeted for takeover or closure; the government cites Proclamation 73 to assert control over curricula and foreign partnerships. Reports show seizures of Catholic and other religious schools and periodic nationalization of training institutions.⁶ Students and staff at religious colleges have been arrested for unauthorized worship or congregation — actions that deter religious education and force faith instruction underground.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

Those who run afoul of the regime end up in some of the harshest detention conditions found anywhere in the world. Eritrean prisons, operated by the Ministries of Justice and Defense and filled with prisoners of conscience, are notorious for torture, deliberate food deprivation, and the confinement of inmates in metal shipping containers exposed to the desert heat. For many imprisoned believers, there is no earthly escape. While much about these facilities remains hidden, survivor accounts reveal a bleak and harrowing existence inside.

SURVEILLANCE

Surveillance within Eritrea is pervasive. Security services monitor congregations, restrict communications, and record worship activity. The combination of surveillance, travel restrictions and government oversight of approved religious bodies creates an environment where independent religious expression is risky, and families and congregations self-censor to avoid punitive action.

CITATIONS

¹ <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023-08/2023%20Eritrea%20Country%20Update.pdf>
² <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/eritrea/>
³ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/eritrea>
⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/eritrea-seeks-end-mandate-un-expert-investigating-abuses-document-shows-2025-06-25/>
⁵ <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0329>
⁶ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/africa/news/2021-06/eritrea-bishops-criticise-the-nationalisation-of-catholic-schoo.html>

DESIGNATION

COUNTRY STATUS

SWL

CPC

SPECIAL WATCHLIST:
2023 - 2026

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1

LEVEL 2

LEVEL 3

LEVEL 4

EXERCISE INCREASED CAUTION in Eritrea due to travel restrictions, limited consular assistance, landmines, and wrongful detentions. (As of July 31, 2023)

BY THE NUMBERS

100+
CHRISTIANS ARRESTED
Between July 1, 2024, and July 1, 2025

15
ATTACKS ON HOUSES

12+
FORCED TO FLEE
THEIR HOMES

THESE FIGURES
REPRESENT ONLY
A SMALL PORTION
OF THE LARGER
PERSECUTION
PICTURE.

International Christian Concern (ICC) partners with the International Institute for Religious Freedom to support its Violent Incidents Database. These figures represent a small fraction of the larger persecution picture.

ICC NEWSROOM

8 Christians Endure Decades of Imprisonment in Eritrea Nov. 20, 2025

Eight Christians have languished in prison cells in the eastern African nation of Eritrea for between 18 and 21 years for simply following Christ. Despite public outcry and egregious violations of religious liberties, the nation refuses to release the Christians. Eritrean authorities routinely arrest and imprison Christians in horrific conditions under severe authoritarian rule.

Eritrea: The North Korea of Africa Oct. 3, 2024

By Linda Burkle, PhD, ICC Fellow

In a world saturated with information, the widespread persecution of Christians is often overlooked, even as millions face daily violence, imprisonment, and discrimination for their faith. This reality is especially severe in places like Eritrea, where a repressive government tightly controls religious life, forcing many believers to practice in secret and endure extreme hardship.

USCIRF Calls for Further Action Against Religious Persecution in Eritrea May 21, 2024

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) released an article calling on the Biden administration to draw greater attention to religious freedom violations in Eritrea.

In the article, USCIRF highlights the treatment of prisoners in Eritrea as particularly egregious.

“Two entire decades have passed since the Eritrean government arrested Pastors Haile Nayzgi and Dr. Kiflu Gebremeskel, USCIRF Commissioner Frank Wolf said. “It is unconscionable that these two men, along with Pastor Meron Gebreselasie, who was arrested a month later, remain imprisoned under horrible conditions. Bishop Abune Antonios died at age 94 in 2022 while under house arrest. Other Eritrean church leaders should not suffer the same fate.”

Tears on Sacred Ground: The Heartbreaking Plight of Eritrea’s Christians Jan. 22, 2024

Aman broke down and wept openly at a church in Ethiopia. The pastor of the church asked the man what caused his anguish. Distraught, the man revealed that he is an Eritrean Christian who had just fled Eritrea as a refugee. While attempting to cross the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea, he and his son were separated. After three weeks of searching refugee camps, he received the worst news any parent can get: his son was shot and killed by Eritrean border guards.

“I came to Ethiopia to take my son away from persecution. Now I must continue on without him,” cried the grieving father.

To read more persecution news from Eritrea and other regions, visit www.persecution.org

FACES OF THE PERSECUTED

DR. K

Dr. K has been in prison in Eritrea for more than 20 years without charge or trial. He is now 70 years old. His family, which includes his wife, one daughter, two sons, and grandson, currently resides in multiple nations and cannot visit or contact Dr. K. The family knows very little about Dr. K’s situation in prison due to the lack of contact. His daughter, Maria, is aware that Dr. K shares a cell with other pastors who were similarly never convicted. In 2019, the prison started placing tighter restrictions on the inmates, confiscating all personal belongings and not allowing access to religious texts. Luckily, the pastors have memorized most of the Bible and can encourage each other through the word of God. Maria sadly reports that some of the pastors have suffered severe mental struggles due to the prolonged isolation. In addition to the tangible absence of their father, Dr. K’s children have found difficulty in international travel to Eritrea due to visa restrictions. Additionally, if a prisoner is ever released, both families and prisoners will be watched by the government for the remainder of their lives.

PASTOR M

Pastor M was living in Asmara when there was an attack on his home, and all his religious materials were stolen and destroyed. Attempting to flee the country, Pastor M traveled on foot to the border despite the publication of his picture in all the police departments throughout the country. Pastor M witnessed the killing of several people as he waited for the right moment to get smuggled across. Border security has increased in the past several months after Russia gave military weapons to the government in 2023. Fearing for his life, Pastor M reluctantly returned to Asmara, where he had to hide in the mountains, only able to go home for a few hours each night to retrieve goods. Pastor M is severely malnourished and has lost a substantial portion of his weight. According to one source, “He is encouraged and knows that the Lord still wants him in Eritrea, although he is exhausted and doesn’t want to be imprisoned again.” Pastor M hopes to find a new rental home to escape fear.



ICC AT WORK

ICC Fights for Four Christian Pastors Held Illegally in Eritrea for 20 years

Hundreds of people signed ICC's petition to ask the Eritrean government to release four pastors held unjustly.

For more than 20 years, four courageous Christian pastors have been unjustly detained in Eritrea without charges. Their crime? Practicing their faith and serving their communities.

- Pastor Haile Naizghe: A former senior accountant with World Vision who dedicated his life to spiritual care.
- Dr. Kiflu Gebremeskel: A mathematics lecturer with a Ph.D. from the United States, committed to education and faith.
- Pastor Meron Gebreselasie: An anesthetist who provided critical medical care to his neighbors.
- Pastor Kidane Weldou: A secondary school biology teacher who inspired many through his teaching and leadership.

These men were arrested in the early 2000s for their leadership in local churches. Instead of fostering their invaluable contributions to Eritrean society, they remain imprisoned under appalling conditions. Reports indicate that Pastor Kidane is suffering from severe eye problems, while Pastor Gebremeskel battles stress-related hypertension and diabetes due to the inhumane living conditions.

CONCLUSION

Eritrea remains a tightly controlled one-party state where political control and national security logic override freedoms of religion and conscience. The PFDJ and its security apparatus — including the Eritrean Defense Forces and the Office of Religious Affairs — shape a landscape in which independent religious life is criminalized, institutions are vulnerable to takeover, and worshippers risk arrest and indefinite detention.

A defining element of persecution in Eritrea is the complete lack of independent accountability: the judiciary is subordinate to security and military jurisdictions, military courts try civilians, and the state obstructs independent monitors. Eritrea's 1997 constitution remains unimplemented, and without functioning checks, administrative instruments become tools of persecution. International efforts at scrutiny meet consistent resistance, underscoring the regime's determination to avoid external accountability.

The humanitarian effects are clear. Religious persecution contributes to refugee flows, chills education and civil society, and compounds the harms of forced service and harsh detention conditions. International pressure remains necessary but insufficient on its own. Durable change will require real avenues for accountability, independent monitoring, and diplomatic strategies that reduce impunity while protecting vulnerable communities.

For advocates and policymakers, the immediate priorities are ensuring protections for prisoners of conscience, documenting ongoing abuses, supporting refugees and diaspora communities, and keeping international attention focused on Eritrea's systemic repression.

LEGAL TAKE

By ICC Human Rights Counsel

If there is any takeaway for religious freedom advocates regarding Eritrea, it's that we cannot neglect Christians imprisoned for their faith. According to USCIRF, religious freedom prisoners, "endure particularly severe mistreatment, including physical abuse, sexual violence, torture, and denial of medical treatment, sometimes resulting in death. Additionally, prison authorities pressure arrested individuals to renounce their faith and ban praying aloud, singing, preaching, and possessing religious books."

Additionally, some of the "prisons" aren't even true prisons as prisoners have been locked in metal shipping containers, derelict buildings, or simply "holes in the ground" that provide little to no shelter from the harsh elements.

Prisoner's rights and advocates are often the last resort for condemned Christians sentenced to brutal facilities where governments hope they're eventually forgotten. It can be a difficult cause to take up as years can go by without any changes in a prisoner's situation. But the mechanisms to make a difference do exist, and if nothing else, a Christian prisoner simply knowing they are not forgotten can combat the despair and depression so common among those in chains for Christ.

REPORTS



Eritrea: The North Korea of Africa

International Christian Concern

Eritrea 2023 International Religious Freedom Report

U.S. State Department

Eritrea Report

Human Rights Watch

AFRICA

NIGERIA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (Boko Haram): Boko Haram continues to present an existential threat to Nigeria's central and northern Christian communities. Founded in 2002 as a school for Islamic education, the group quickly grew in influence and in 2009 began committing acts of terror in a campaign of violence that continues to this day. Known for its mass kidnappings, attacks on police, and brutality toward civilians, Boko Haram has murdered tens of thousands of civilians and indirectly caused the death of hundreds of thousands more.

A United Nations study estimated that insecurity-driven factors like access to food, mass displacement, and unsanitary drinking water in areas disrupted by Boko Haram had led to well over 300,000 deaths among children younger than 5 years old by the end of 2020.¹ While that study has not been repeated in more recent years, the 2020 study estimated nearly 700,000 cumulative deaths by 2025.

Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP): Boko Haram's stint as an Islamic State affiliate was short lived, lasting from March 2015 to August 2016 when the Islamic State attempted to remove Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau for targeting Muslim civilians in defiance of Islamic State orders. During the 2016 split, part of the group splintered off to form a separate terrorist organization that soon gained recognition from the Islamic State and today is known as ISWAP.²

Formed as a reaction to Boko Haram's scorched-earth tactics, ISWAP has mimicked the more narrowly targeted tactics used by al-Qaida. Instead of extorting and attacking local Muslim communities, ISWAP gives loans to young entrepreneurs, maintains infrastructure, and provides social assistance to those in need. By allying itself with local communities, ISWAP is able to launch devastating attacks on Christian areas and has grown to become one of the Islamic State's largest and deadliest affiliates anywhere in the world.³

Local Extremists: Though much of the violence devastating Nigeria stems from organized international terror groups like ISWAP and Boko Haram, an equally deadly threat has arisen in the form of community-level radicalization including the threat posed by extremist factions within the Fulani community. Sometimes triggered by conflict over limited resources like land or water, these community-level clashes are quickly revealed as religious in nature when pastors, churches, and entire Christian communities are selectively targeted by the Muslim-majority Fulani militants.

Underscoring the religious nature of what some analysts attempt to explain as simple clashes over resources, there is some indication that ISWAP is funding Fulani militant attacks on Christian farmers as another way to target Christians and establish an Islamic caliphate in West Africa.⁴

Government: The Nigerian government goes to great lengths to present itself to the international community as a well-intentioned but under-resourced government doing its best to combat violence and promote peace within its borders. While the threat posed by Boko Haram and ISWAP is significant and community-level violence may be difficult to fully address, this narrative is a naked attempt to hide the active failings of the Nigerian government and its role in perpetuating the violence against vulnerable religious communities.

Twelve of Nigeria's 36 states follow Sharia law, even imposing the death sentence for religious crimes like blasphemy.⁵ In Nigeria's central Kaduna State, governor Nasir el-Rufai was known to punish Christian communities during his tenure with blanket house arrest orders, allowing Fulani militants to sweep in on the unguarded communities and kill hundreds. Across the country, authorities refuse to protect churches and other high-risk targets, instead retreating to the relative safety of regional military bases and typically only responding to attacks hours or days after the attackers have left the area.

QUICK FACTS

Region: Sub-Saharan Africa

Population: 236.74 million

Religious Demography:

- 54% Muslim
- 46% Christian

Languages:

- English
- Hausa
- Yoruba
- Igbo
- Fulani



“Abandoned by their government, the vulnerable Christian communities in Nigeria’s central and northern regions are being relentlessly targeted because of their faith.”

—ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

EXTREMISM

Nigeria’s extremist threat remains acute. Islamist groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP continue their brutal attacks on civilians. In April 2025, violence related to Fulani militants claimed more than 150 lives across Benue and Plateau states, leading to the destruction of hundreds of villages and the displacement of over 500,000 people. The continued assaults against Christians underscore the federal government’s muted response to the threat posed by extremism in Nigeria.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

Twelve northern states and the federal government continue to enforce blasphemy laws under Sharia, which have resulted in arrests, death sentences, and prolonged detention.⁶ International bodies have condemned these laws, yet the Nigerian government remain defiantly defensive of these discriminatory laws.

POLITICS

According to research by Amnesty International, at least 10,217 people were killed in attacks by gunmen in the first two years of President Bola Tinubu’s term in office.⁷ Elected on promises to eliminate terrorist violence, Tinubu has overseen an environment in which new groups have continued to emerge and established groups have only grown in effectiveness.

EDUCATION

Education in Nigeria continues to suffer because of violent persecution. Groups like Boko Haram persist in targeting women and girls, denying them access to schooling as a method of control and indoctrination. While Nigeria has made efforts through international partnerships to uphold girls’ education, progress is hindered by security challenges and weak enforcement. Lack of access to education has created a population of desperate and disenfranchised youth that is vulnerable to recruitment by terrorist groups.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

Even Nigeria continues to enforce its state-level blasphemy laws, its justice system has failed to effectively deal with broader threats such as terrorism. Most attackers escape altogether, and even those who are arrested often go for years without prosecution. Five suspects linked to the 2022 St. Francis church massacre in Owo were only arraigned in August 2025, over three years after an attack that killed more than 50 worshippers.⁸

REFUGEE & IDP CAMPS

Nigeria’s IDP camps are under severe strain. Massacres in April 2025 displaced more than 500,000 people and led to prolonged humanitarian suffering. Amnesty International reported dire conditions — including overcrowding, poor sanitation, limited food and medical care — and heightened vulnerability to disease and gender-based violence in Benue’s camps.⁹

WOMEN

Women are disproportionately affected by overlapping crises in Nigeria. A July 2025 investigation by Global Rights Nigeria revealed systemic sexual exploitation of women and girls — often displaced Christians — in camps for internally displaced people (IDPs), where access to essentials such as food or shelter is often contingent on sexual favors to camp officials and fellow IDPs.¹⁰

DESIGNATION

COUNTRY STATUS

SWL

CPC

COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR CONCERN: 2023-2026

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1

LEVEL 2

LEVEL 3

LEVEL 4

RECONSIDER TRAVEL to Nigeria due to crime, terrorism, unrest, kidnapping, and inconsistent availability of health care services. (As of April 8, 2026)

BY THE NUMBERS

500+ CHRISTIANS KILLED
Between July 1, 2024, and July 1, 2025

29 BUILDINGS DAMAGED

208 ABDUCTIONS

479 ATTACKS ON HOUSES

2,000 PEOPLE FORCED TO FLEE THEIR HOMES

International Christian Concern (ICC) partners with the International Institute for Religious Freedom to support its Violent Incidents Database. These figures represent a small fraction of the larger persecution picture.

ICC NEWSROOM

Nigeria Remains in the Crosshairs of Attention for Crimes Against Christians Dec. 5, 2025

Nigerian government leaders remain in a global vise of attention and pressure for the ongoing mass killings and kidnappings of Christians by Islamic extremists.

The U.S. Department of State this week opened the door for travel sanctions against Nigeria's leaders who violate religious freedom.

How Do Nigeria's Christians Feel About Western Media's 'Climate Change' Explanation? Nov. 27, 2025

President Trump's recent move to designate Nigeria a "Country of Particular Concern" for violating religious freedom has led to widespread debate over the reasons why so many Nigerian Christian communities have faced violent attacks.

One of the most common reasons given is "climate change." This reason — especially popular among Western media outlets — is often used to portray the violent attacks in Nigeria as being a conflict over natural resources instead of having a religious motivation.

More than 300 Students and Staff Abducted in Nigeria; ICC President Issues Call to Action Nov. 22, 2025

More than 300 students and staff were abducted from a Catholic School in the Northern Region of Nigeria on Friday. International Christian Concern (ICC) President Shawn Wright issued a statement, calling on government leaders to do more to protect vulnerable Christian communities.

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) on Saturday raised its estimate of those taken from St. Mary's School in Niger state on Friday from 227 to 315, including 303 students and 12 teachers. It is one of the worst kidnappings in the nation's history, which has unfortunately become a flashpoint for Christian persecution.

"Our hearts break, and we pray for the families affected by this latest tragedy," Wright said. "The government of Nigeria must do more to protect Christian communities after years and years of ineffectiveness and empty promises. Yes, it's a complex situation in Nigeria, but Christians have suffered from extremists' attacks while government officials and much of the world have looked the other way."

African Union Responds to Trump's Claims Regarding Nigeria's Religious Freedom Nov. 13, 2025

The African Union finally addresses the killing of Christians in Nigeria and released its statement in response to President Donald Trump's threats to Nigeria if circumstances do not change.

The commission stated in a recent press release that it has concerns about "... recent statements by the United States of America alleging that the Government of Nigeria is complicit in the targeted killing of Christians and threatening military action," stating that "Any external engagement must respect Nigeria's sovereignty, territorial integrity and unity ..."

To read more persecution news from Nigeria and other regions, visit www.persecution.org



LEGAL TAKE

By ICC Human Rights Counsel

On Oct. 31, 2025, the U.S. government designated Nigeria as a "Country of Particular Concern," marking a major policy victory for religious freedom advocates wishing to combat the violence in the Middle Belt.

A Country of Particular Concern (CPC) designation is the U.S. government's premier legal tool to combat religious persecution abroad. Part of the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, a country designated a CPC by the U.S. Department of State is subject to a list of financial and diplomatic penalties, not least of which is being named alongside the most egregious violators of religious freedom globally.

For a country to be designated a CPC, it's not enough for any degree of persecution to exist in the country. The State Department must find that "particularly severe violations of religious freedom" exist consistently throughout the country. As a result of this high legal standard, of the 22 countries featured in this Index, only 13 have been designated as CPCs. Regardless of debates over who has or hasn't been designated, officially adding Nigeria's name to this infamous list is an important step toward diplomatically addressing this crisis.

REPORTS



State Complicity in Nigeria's Christian Genocide Campaign
International Christian Concern



Nigeria's Terrorism Economy
International Christian Concern



Nigeria's \$10 Million Genocide Cover-Up
International Christian Concern

ICC AT WORK

- Working with a partner to provide emergency relief packages to Christian victims of violence, particularly from jihadist attacks.
- Farm projects throughout Nigeria offer education, training, and supplies to encourage sustainable agriculture and allow Christians to support themselves and their families.
- Drilling a borehole well in Adamawa state in collaboration with a partner that will provide water to a community that has experienced significant violent persecution.
- Hope House schools serve more than 1,000 students who have been orphaned or forced from their homes by jihadist groups. They receive holistic care through school curriculum, hot meals, and Bible classes.
- Generation Transformation scholarship program for deserving Christian students who otherwise wouldn't have the means.
- Trauma healing for victims of violent persecution, offering them a biblical path to hope and restoration.
- Motorbikes and Bibles to local pastors who seek to increase their reach, equipping them with materials as they evangelize.
- ICC's advocacy team sent a petition with nearly 1,000 signatures to Nigeria's First Lady Oluremi Tinubu, a Christian mother, to address the forced marriages and conversions of young girls in her country. ICC has also helped relocate victims and families in other circumstances.
- ICC President Shawn Wright outlined several recommendations for U.S. and Nigerian officials to help resolve the persecution.
- Ongoing coverage of attacks and a report on troubling persecution trends in Africa.



CONCLUSION

The plight of Christians in Nigeria's Middle Belt and northern regions throughout 2025 underscored the convergence of extremist violence, sectarian conflict, and government complicity in persecution. While not the only cause of unrest in Nigeria, religious animosity has continued to fuel mass humanitarian crises in states like Benue and Plateau where hundreds have been killed and hundreds of thousands displaced.

A consistently inadequate government response has allowed violence to metastasize out of control. While President Tinubu's administration pledged security reforms, it has struggled to deliver sustained protection for vulnerable populations like central and northern Christians. Blasphemy laws in 12 northern states persist, enabling arbitrary arrests and reinforcing a climate of fear. Displacement camps are swelling, exposing women and girls to heightened exploitation and violence.

Nigeria's crisis is not merely a security issue — it is a challenge to religious freedom, social cohesion, and human dignity. Without comprehensive strategies that address both the ideological drivers of extremism and the systemic governance failures that enable it, violence will remain cyclical.

CITATIONS

- ¹ <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/ng/Assessing-the-Impact-of-Conflict-on-Development-in-NE-Nigeria---The-Report.pdf>
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- ⁹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/07/nigeria-violence-and-widespread-displacement-leave-benue-facing-a-humanitarian-disaster/>
- ¹⁰ <https://www.thisdaylive.com/2025/07/19/report-how-sex-is-traded-for-safety-survival-in-idp-camps-in-nigeria/>

BOLA AHMED TINUBU

After upending Nigeria's delicate political balance in 2023, President Tinubu's term has been marked by continued persecution and deep-set violence that makes Nigeria a dangerous place for Christians.

OVERVIEW

Tinubu did not create the religious tensions playing out across the Middle Belt — that all started long before his time in office. However, he only deepened the country's religious divide when he abandoned the long-standing tradition of presidential candidates choosing a running mate from a different faith.

Rather than choose a prominent Christian, as tradition would dictate, he chose Kashim Shettima, a fellow Muslim and former governor of Borno state, to join him on the APC ticket. His choice sparked harsh criticism among non-Muslim leaders who felt that the decision marginalized the interests of Christians and undercut confidence among minority communities that the presidency would respect their security and rights.

Tinubu was elected on the tightest presidential race since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999. Complicating matters, only 27% of eligible voters participated in the election, meaning that Tinubu's 37% of the vote netted him just 9.3% of eligible voters — hardly a compelling electoral mandate in a country already struggling to find common political ground.

Research by Amnesty International

indicates that at least 10,217 people were killed in the first two years of Tinubu's administration, led by widespread and escalating attacks that are largely concentrated in the country's fractious Middle Belt region.¹

Nigeria's Middle Belt is where the country's Muslim-majority north and Christian-majority south meet and has been the site of significant religiously motivated bloodshed in recent years, driven in large part by Islamist insurgents who brutally target Christian communities.

Security has remained Tinubu's most visible governance challenge. Islamist groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP continue to carry out devastating attacks in the northeast, criminal "bandit" networks and kidnappers ravage the northwest and parts of the Middle Belt, and communal clashes — sometimes motivated by religion, sometimes by land and governance failures — kill and displace tens of thousands each year. Despite periodic military offensives and occasional public commitments from Abuja, many attacks go unresolved, and perpetrators remain at large, fueling perceptions of impunity and state incapacity or indifference.



QUICK FACTS

Official Title: President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria

Assumed Office: May 2023

Born: 1952 in Lagos state

Party / Affiliation: All Progressives Congress

PERSECUTION MEASURES

UNCHECKED MILITANCY

Nigeria continues to be torn apart by armed violence stemming from organized terror groups and decentralized movements of local extremists, including among the Fulani community, who have killed many thousands of Christians over hundreds of attacks in recent years.

LEGAL PERSECUTION

The 12 northern states continue to keep and enforce blasphemy laws that criminalize disfavored religious opinions.

MOB VIOLENCE

Sometimes reacting to rumors of blasphemy, mobs in the 12 northern states have repeatedly lynched Christians in gruesome examples of vigilante justice. Too often the perpetrators are left unprosecuted.

POLITICAL MARGINALIZATION

Tinubu's decision to break with decades of precedent and run for the presidency with a fellow Muslim has eroded trust among Christians and marginalized their interests on the national political stage.

ICC RECOMMENDATIONS

- Immediate, independent investigations into reported mass killings and reprisals; full access for international monitors to sites of atrocities.
- Conditioned international recognition and aid on concrete benchmarks such as real protections for vulnerable religious communities.
- Support programs for displaced communities and targeted protections for vulnerable religious groups.
- International leadership to reverse legal barriers such as blasphemy laws.

SUMMARY

- Bola Ahmed Tinubu, president since May 2023, has presided over a Nigeria in which longstanding, delicate balances between Christians and Muslims are strained by partisan politics, contested elections, and persistent insecurity.
- Tinubu's decision in 2022 to run with Kashim Shettima — a fellow Muslim — broke the widely followed convention of religious balancing on presidential tickets and reignited fears among many Christians of diminished political respect and protections.
- Security challenges across Nigeria — insurgency in the northeast, banditry and kidnappings in the northwest, and community violence in the Middle Belt — continue with alarming impunity, leaving Christians vulnerable in many areas.
- The legal environment for religious expression remains fraught: northern states continue to apply sharia-based blasphemy statutes, and a series of high-profile blasphemy cases and controversial prosecutions have highlighted the unequal protection of religious minorities.

SOMALIA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Al-Shabab: Founded in the early 2000s in Somalia, al-Shabab has grown into a powerful force across the Horn of Africa region. It is affiliated with the better-known al-Qaida terrorist group and controls significant swaths of central and southern Somalia. A series of attacks launched in February 2025 were its largest in years and led to territorial gains for the group in several key areas.¹ Government control is largely limited to the cities, with al-Shabab operating as a quasi-governmental entity in many rural areas.

Al-Shabab is open about its desire to eradicate Christianity from Somalia and establish an Islamic caliphate in place of the current government. The group views converts to Christianity as traitors to Islam and Somali identity and is known to have executed Christians on sight, creating a pervasive environment of fear and intimidation for the country's 1,000-2,000 Christians.

Judiciary: As antagonistic as al-Shabab is toward Christianity, the government is no friend of the church either. Under the country's current operating constitutional framework, all laws must align with Sharia, Islam is the official religion, Muslims may not convert to another faith, and Christian evangelism is totally prohibited.²

The Somali judicial system is extremely inconsistent and does not abide by a single legal code in its decision-making. In areas outside of the capital Mogadishu, al-Shabab operates a parallel legal system based on a harsh interpretation of Sharia law. In government-controlled areas, judges operate off a perplexing mix of Sharia law, local tradition, and the written penal code. This inconsistency makes true justice all but impossible, and the common thread of fundamentalist Islamic thought makes justice even more elusive for any Christians caught in the system.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Abu Ubaidah: Taking power after the 2014 death of infamous al-Shabab leader Ahmed Abdi Godane, Ubaidah now leads the terrorist group and its campaign of violent Islamist extremism.³ Before taking his current role, he was a senior advisor to Godane and responsible for administering al-Shabab's quasi-governmental control within Somalia, according to a U.S. government notification announcing up to \$10 million in rewards for information on him.⁴

For the last decade, Ubaidah has directed and encouraged al-Shabab's strategy of strict Sharia enforcement in areas under its control, as well as numerous violent campaigns including suicide bombings, assassinations, and attacks on both civilian populations and government targets. He uses his platform to further extremism in Somalia, calling for the wholesale overthrow of the government and arguing that "any solution that does not include jihad is destined for despair and regret," in a 2024 speech.⁵



QUICK FACTS

Region: Sub-Saharan Africa

Population: 13.02 million

Religious Demography:

- 99.9% Muslim
- 0.01% Other

Languages:

- Somali

“Living in complete isolation and under the constant threat of terrorist violence, Somalia’s tiny Christian community has been driven to practice their faith in secrecy, knowing discovery could mean imprisonment, torture, or death.”

—ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

Somali national identity is closely tied to Islam, making the Muslim faith a key element of true patriotism. Converts to Christianity are viewed as betraying both their religion and nationality, leading to severe social and familial repercussions. This ideology is solidly ensconced in the law, with the provisional constitution repeatedly elevating Islam as the country’s core foundational principle and the primary basis for law and justice.

EXTREMISM

While antagonistic to the government’s flavor of Islamic nationalism, al-Shabab promotes its own take on identity based on the concept of an Islamic caliphate. The group’s role as a local affiliate for al-Qaida elevates this vision beyond the national level to the global stage and ensures that Christians and other religious minorities are hunted mercilessly as part of al-Qaida’s global desire for dominance.

Even regular citizens are pushed toward extremism. In one 2025 case, an ICC article about work in Somalia went viral after a Somali social media influencer spread it on TikTok, calling on Allah to destroy the church and urging his followers to hunt down Christian converts.⁶

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

Written Somali law contains provisions criminalizing proselytization and interfaith marriage, while more informal elements of Sharia-based de facto law prohibit blasphemy and conversion as well. Even if not under the government’s legal system, converts still face the threat of death at the hands of their families or communities and al-Shabab operates a parallel legal system in much of the country based on an even harsher interpretation of Sharia.

POLITICS

The Somali government’s inability to control al-Shabab’s strongholds allows the militant group to enforce its own interpretation of Sharia law, sidelining any political efforts to protect religious minorities. Government rhetoric about tolerance and its efforts to combat extremism, futile at best, is hampered by its own promotion of Islam.

EDUCATION

Christian education is virtually nonexistent in Somalia. Converts risk exposure to persecution if they attempt to educate others about Christianity, as such activities are considered subversive and punishable by death. Christian activity in the country is completely under cover, so Christian parents must work to make their families fit in to avoid the potentially lethal results of being discovered by their community.

DESIGNATION

COUNTRY STATUS



Somalia has only been recommended and not officially on the list.

TRAVEL ADVISORY



DO NOT TRAVEL to Somalia due to crime, terrorism, civil unrest, health, kidnapping, piracy, and lack of availability of routine consular services. (As of May 14, 2025)



LEGAL TAKE

By ICC Human Rights Counsel

Al-Shabab, as is the case for several other extremist groups discussed in this GPI, is the principal driver of persecution in Somalia. And while the role of extremist groups in the landscape of persecution is something many people are at least aware of, its existence presents a conundrum that international law and governments have been wrestling with since 9/11 and the war on terror.

Traditional international law and the laws of war were meant to govern the relationships between nations. However, in the latter 20th and early 21st centuries, isolated groups of religious or political extremists, working independently of any recognized government, began influencing global affairs in ways that used to only be possible for countries.

Eventually labeled as “non-state actors,” they have taken an increasingly dominant role in global events while slipping through traditional safeguards meant to restrain nations. Non-state actors engaged in severe violations of religious freedom are tracked by USCIRF and designated as “entities of particular concern,” including Al-Shabab.

BY THE NUMBERS

12*

CHRISTIANS KILLED

International Christian Concern (ICC) partners with the International Institute for Religious Freedom to support its Violent Incidents Database.

*These figures represent a small fraction of the larger persecution picture.

ICC NEWSROOM

Article About ICC's Work in Somalia Goes Viral, Angers Somali Muslims Aug. 26, 2025

A recent article we posted on our website about Christian persecution in Somalia and our support for the underground church there went viral, sparking both positive and negative reactions.

The article, *Serving the Hidden Church in Somalia*, was originally published in May. It received the usual responses on our Facebook, Instagram, and X accounts — expressions of sadness for what our brothers and sisters in Christ endure in Somalia, promises to keep them in prayer, and a desire to help them.

However, shortly after we recently reposted the article, a Muslim Somali influencer named Ahmed Showqi shared it on his TikTok account. It garnered about 1.4 million views, more than 62,000 likes, and more than 24,000 shares. He also shared it on other social media channels. Here's a translation of what he said in his video:

"There's a Christian organization called International Christian Concern and many others who are reaching out to the underground Christian community in Mogadishu, and this organization said that the number of Christians in Mogadishu alone is 1,500!

Christian Convert Assaulted by Relatives in Somalia Oct. 25, 2024

As Mohammad Abdul led a Christian worship gathering on the evening of Oct. 5 in his home in Somalia's Lower Juba Region, four Muslim relatives waited outside for the event to end.

As the worship ended, his relatives confronted Abdul, asking him why he was worshipping God differently.

"My prayer is a secret between me and my Lord Isa [Jesus]," Abdul told his relatives.

"Why should I pray in public? That's just a way to please men. In my time of worship, I should please only God, who is in the heavenly places. Isa, who saved me, knows my heart, and I am happy in my heart, so leave me alone."

His relatives then assaulted Abdul, hitting him with a blunt object and slapping him in the face. He suffered a fracture in his left hand, injuries to the fingers of his right hand, and cuts to his face.

Abdul, who converted to Christianity in March, has been assaulted two other times for his faith, once on May 5 and again on July 8.

Six Christians Killed on Good Friday in Somalia April 8, 2024

Suspected al-Shabab Islamic extremists killed six Christian men in Somalia on Friday, March 29. The Christians, originally from Kenya, sold plastic goods and shared the gospel with Muslims in the Islamic town of Dhobley.

A Kenyan church near the Somali border supported the men during their time in Somalia. The church reported several Muslims secretly attending evening prayers, which may have drawn the attention of al-Shabab.

Witnesses to the murders described four hooded men shooting the Christians near the back of the shop where they sold their goods. After killing the four merchants, the assailants set the shop on fire, killing the remaining two men.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken designated al-Shabab as an Entity of Particular concern under the International Religious Freedom Act and the supplemental Frank Wolf Act. This designation indicates the U.S. government found al-Shabab engaged in particularly severe violations of religious freedom and "exercises significant political power and territorial control; is outside the control of a sovereign government; and often employs violence in pursuit of its objectives."

To read more persecution news from Somalia and other regions, visit www.persecution.org

REPORTS



2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Somalia U.S. Department of State

ICC AT WORK

- Emergency relief packages to Christian victims of violence, particularly those in marriages or families that do not support conversion from Islam.
- Supporting communities that have suffered violent attacks from al-Shabab and similar groups.
- Small business support throughout the region. Most ICC beneficiaries are MBBs who need a way to support themselves after being rejected by their families and communities.
- Hope House provides safe harbor to MBBs and other Christians who are no longer safe in their communities due to their faith.
- Gospel outreach in highly sensitive areas.

CONCLUSION

The Horn of Africa, a loose geographic term that encompasses Somalia along with Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, South Sudan, and Uganda, is rife with insecurity. From tense disputes over water rights to violent ethnic and political conflicts within countries, the region has been experiencing increased tension in the last few years.

Reporting shows that al-Shabab has evolved from a purely militant movement into a proto-governing authority in many parts of Somalia. In territories under its control, the group has established Sharia-based courts that handle civil and criminal disputes. These courts are often faster, cheaper, and more predictable than the official Somali justice system, which suffers from corruption, long delays, and prohibitive fees. For ordinary Somalis unable to access government courts, al-Shabab's system provides a semblance of order.

Beyond justice, al-Shabab has sought to extend its influence through education and social services. The group operates Islamic institutes, so-called "bush universities" for training jurists, and schools with alternative curricula that

indoctrinate students into its extremist ideology. These initiatives help al-Shabab cultivate loyalty while embedding its radical worldview into younger generations.

This governance model mirrors strategies used by other Islamist groups, notably Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the Lake Chad region, which has also combined social service delivery with violent coercion to entrench control.

While al-Shabab gains some local support by providing services, the justice it offers is far from impartial. Decisions are arbitrary, punishments are brutal, and religious minorities are denied protection altogether. Christians, in particular, face harassment, forced compliance with Sharia, and lethal violence when discovered.

Religious minorities in Somalia have nowhere to turn. The government is openly antagonistic to Christianity and is unabashed about its efforts to promote Islam over all other belief systems. But the alternative — al-Shabab — is a jihadist terror group dedicated to creating an Islamic caliphate that utterly excludes Christianity from its borders.

CITATIONS

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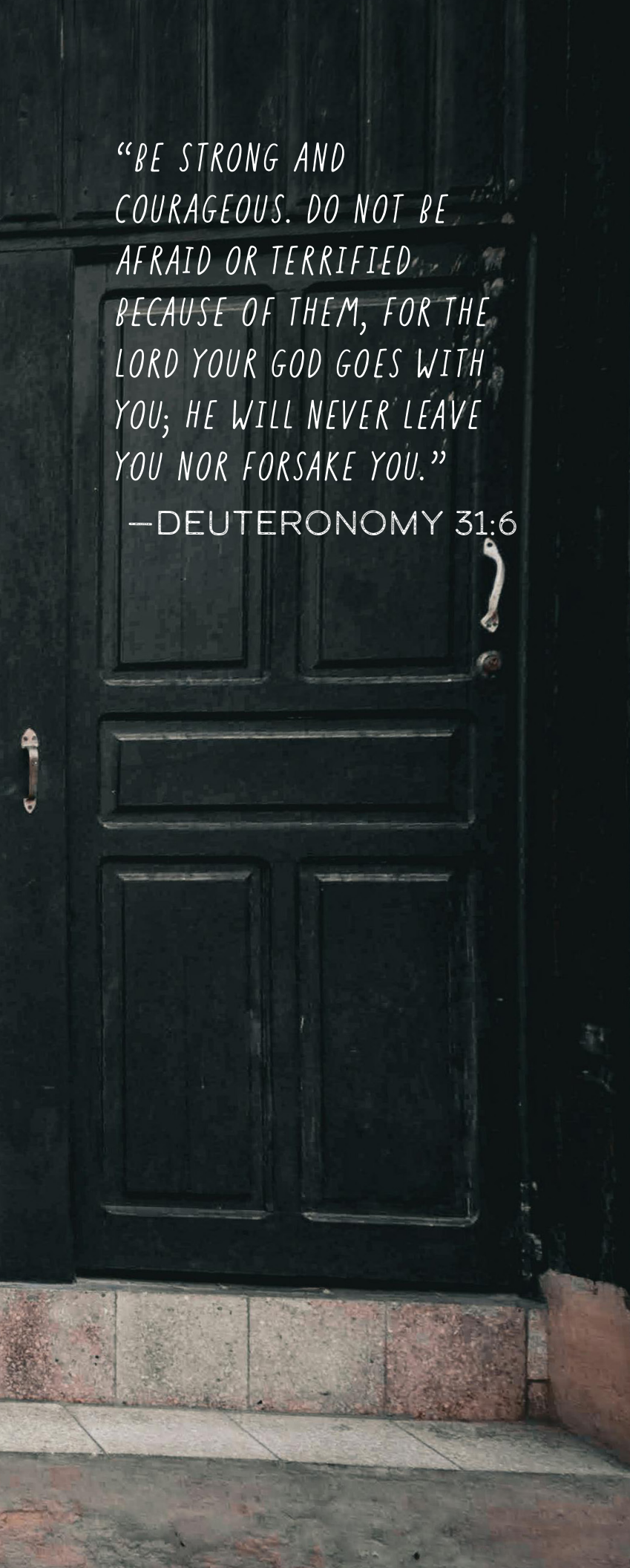
⁷ <https://persecution.org/2025/08/26/article-about-iccs-work-in-somalia-goes-viral-angers-somali-muslims/>

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REGIONAL
OVERVIEW

ISSUES AND TRENDS IN
LATIN
AMERICA



A dark, heavy wooden door with a brass handle and a small window. The door is set in a stone wall. The text is overlaid on the left side of the door.

*"BE STRONG AND
COURAGEOUS. DO NOT BE
AFRAID OR TERRIFIED
BECAUSE OF THEM, FOR THE
LORD YOUR GOD GOES WITH
YOU; HE WILL NEVER LEAVE
YOU NOR FORSAKE YOU."*

—DEUTERONOMY 31:6

Faith in Latin America has long been inseparable from the fabric of daily life. Christianity arrived on the continent centuries ago and took deep root, shaping its cultures, communities, and institutions in ways that persist to this day. Yet across the region, that inheritance is under siege. From the Caribbean island of Cuba to the Central American isthmus of Nicaragua, authoritarian governments have identified the church not as a partner in civic life but as a rival power to be broken.

Latin America's most acute religious freedom crises are unfolding under socialist and communist governance. In Nicaragua, President Daniel Ortega and his co-president and wife, Rosario Murillo, have pursued one of the most aggressive campaigns against the Catholic and Protestant church seen in the Western Hemisphere in modern times — imprisoning priests, exiling bishops, shuttering church-run universities, and expelling foreign missionaries. In Cuba, the communist government of President Miguel Díaz-Canel controls which congregations may operate, what they may preach, and who may lead them, while churches engaged in humanitarian work face surveillance, interrogation, and imprisonment.

Underlying both crises is a common logic: governments that have monopolized political power cannot tolerate institutions that offer citizens an alternative source of meaning, community, and moral authority. It is precisely this that makes the church a target. Yet faith in Latin America endures. In Nicaragua and Cuba alike, believers continue to worship under threat, bearing witness to the truth that no government decree has yet succeeded in extinguishing the flame of faith.

CUBA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Department of State Security: The Department of State Security is a key element of the Communist Party's state security and intelligence apparatus, designed to harass and control religious leaders and communities to bring them under the strictures of state control. The government views the control of religion as a political imperative, with Christians and religious groups facing increased restrictions leading up to the fourth anniversary of political protests in July 2025.¹

State security forces employ arbitrary detentions, surveillance, and harassment of Christian leaders and communities. In 2024, watchdog group CSW documented 1,898 government attacks on religious groups in 624 separate cases, illustrating the scale of the issue and the relentlessness with which the Communist Party persecutes religion.²

Ministry of Justice: Through its Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), the Ministry of Justice systematically controls religious life in Cuba, manipulating it to fit the aims of the Communist Party of Cuba. All religious groups must register with the ORA to operate legally. Any kind of association with an unregistered group is a crime, with leaders of such groups subject to fines and up to two years in prison.³

The ORA's registration decisions are

often, according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, "arbitrary and discriminatory," though some groups can obtain approval for basic operations.⁴ Other groups have waited years for approval but to no avail. Approval from the ORA only allows for a modicum of freedom, registered groups required to seek additional approval for any activity outside of regular worship services, such as importing Bibles, receiving foreign visitors, repairing a place of worship, and even operating a vehicle.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Miguel Díaz-Canel: Díaz-Canel serves as both president of Cuba and first secretary of the country's Communist Party. As is common in such countries, it is his control of the Communist Party that gives him his real power, an authority he continues to use to enforce an oppressive legal framework controlling religion, speech, and assembly.⁵

Under Díaz-Canel, the Office of Religious Affairs expanded its reach, limiting church activity and access to media; religious leaders face systemic obstacles to humanitarian expression. Simultaneously, the administration intensified surveillance and punitive actions against religious dissenters, including the abduction and harassment of pastors. His leadership remains the key enabler of religious repression in Cuba.

QUICK FACTS

Region: Latin America

Population: 10.97 million

Religious Demography:

- 60% Christian
- 23% None
- 17% Folk religions and other

Language:

- Spanish



"Long under the rule of the Communist Party, Cuba has created a dizzying array of laws enabling it to eliminate any semblance of true religious freedom."

—ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

NATIONALISM

National identity, according to the government, is deeply intertwined with Communist ideology, and the party fosters a narrative that the state alone embodies national unity and identity. Religious groups that operate outside government control are depicted as foreign agents or “counter-revolutionary” elements, undermining the revolutionary project.

This rhetoric allows authorities to suppress independent churches and restrict humanitarian outreach under the guise of defending national sovereignty. In practice, nationalism is used to delegitimize Christian communities, particularly those advocating for prisoners’ rights or political reform, marking them as enemies of the Cuban nation.

POLITICS

As in many countries with a deep communist heritage, religion and politics remain inseparably linked in Cuba, with churches often treated as extensions of the opposition. Religious communities advocating for political prisoners or advocating for human rights are seen as undermining state authority. Around the July 2025 anniversary of major protests in 2021, authorities banned religious gatherings for families of detainees and restricted church services deemed politically sensitive. The regime’s fear of faith communities as organizing hubs against authoritarianism ensures that even modest humanitarian acts are politicized. Faith becomes a liability when practiced publicly.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

Arbitrary arrests and imprisonments are central to Cuba’s strategy of controlling religion. Religious leaders are detained for holding unapproved gatherings, distributing aid, or invoking faith in legal settings. In 2025, Pastor Maikel Velázquez was detained and forced to endure a traumatic interrogation after delivering epilepsy medicine to the relative of an imprisoned protestor.⁶ Pastor Luis Borjas and his wife were detained for an emotional appeal to God’s justice at their son’s trial.⁷

Such cases are just two examples highlighting the government’s willingness to criminalize ordinary religious acts. Beyond temporary detention, many leaders face long-term surveillance, harassment, and legal intimidation, all designed to weaken their influence and warn others against public faith expression.⁸

SURVEILLANCE

Surveillance in Cuba is omnipresent, particularly targeting faith communities. State security services regularly summon pastors for interrogations, tap phones, and place informants inside congregations. Churches engaged in humanitarian work or prison outreach are especially vulnerable, with their activities tracked and restricted. Religious leaders continue to report pressure to disclose congregational details, including membership lists and donation records. This constant monitoring creates a climate of fear that limits religious expression. Believers learn to self-censor, knowing that even small gatherings may be infiltrated and scrutinized.

HUMANITARIAN AID

One of the most damaging trends in 2025 was the suppression of church-led humanitarian relief. In the face of worsening shortages of food and medicine, congregations attempted to meet community needs. Instead of supporting these efforts, authorities fined leaders, confiscated aid, and interrogated volunteers. Delivering epilepsy medication, as in Pastor Velázquez’s case, led to disappearance and trauma. By blocking independent humanitarian work, the government maintains monopoly over aid distribution while deepening citizens’ dependence on state structures, further weaponizing scarcity against religious communities.⁹

DESIGNATION

COUNTRY STATUS

SWL

CPC

SPECIAL WATCHLIST: 2022

CPC: 2023-2026

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1

LEVEL 2

LEVEL 3

LEVEL 4

EXERCISE INCREASED CAUTION in Cuba due to crime and unreliable electrical power. (As of May 7, 2025)

ICC AT WORK

In 2024 and 2025, ICC’s advocacy team worked with partners and spearheaded sessions at the International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington, D.C., on topics that included growing Christian persecution in Latin America.

One session, “Faith, Rights, and Resilience: Navigating Religious Liberty in Latin America,” focused on laws that hinder religious freedom in Nicaragua, Cuba, Venezuela, Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil, and other LAC countries.

REPORTS



USCIRF Annual Report 2025 Cuba (p. 18)

*United States Commission
on International Religious
Freedom*



2023 Report on International Religious Freedom in Cuba *U.S. Department of State*



No Respite: The Systematic Suppression of Religious Freedom or Belief in Cuba *CSW May 2025*

ICC NEWSROOM

Pastors Increasingly Targeted, Harassed in Cuba July 29, 2025

Pastor Maikel Pupu Velázquez vanished about 14 hours after delivering epilepsy medication to an acquaintance's granddaughter on July 9 in Cuba.

Velázquez delivered the medicine to the granddaughter of Marta Perdomo Benites, whose sons were imprisoned for participating in a peaceful protest in July 2021 in San José de las Lajas, Mayabeque.

Immediately after the delivery, Velázquez was abruptly barred from entering Perdomo Benites' home. Moments after completing a phone call with another pastor, he disappeared. His phone was instantly switched off, severing all contact.

Pastors from the Alliance of Christians of Cuba (ACC) launched a search for Velázquez, combing hospitals, detention centers, and police stations — yet their efforts yielded no clue to his whereabouts.

At around 2 a.m. on July 10, Velázquez was discovered outside his home, clearly shaken after enduring a traumatic interrogation and serious threats. When questioned, he would not disclose details of the incident and behaved erratically, sometimes yelling and at other times falling eerily silent.

Pastor Velázquez's abduction is only the most recent in a string of alarming cases of pastoral harassment in Cuba.

Cuban Pastors Face Imprisonment for Mentioning God June 4, 2025

A pastoral couple in Cuba faces eight years in prison for mentioning God as they stood up for their son, according to Christian Daily International.

The couple, Pastors Luis Guillermo Borjas and Roxana Rojas had mentioned God as they recently testified during a military tribunal for their son, Kevin Laureido Rojas.

Their son, who has a psychiatric condition, had allegedly fled a military facility after government authorities forced him to fulfill his mandatory military service, despite having a medical exemption.

Authorities detained the Assemblies of God pastors on May 19 and charged them with disrespecting and disobeying authorities.

"Pastor Borjas protested, stating that the officials in the court would be accountable to 'God's justice,'" Christian Solidarity Worldwide reported. "The prosecutor then ordered the couple to be detained and charged, claiming that it is illegal to mention God or God's justice in a military tribunal."

A military prosecutor is seeking an eight-year prison sentence for the couple.

Cuban Pastor Released After More Than 3 Years Behind Bars Jan. 22, 2025

Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo gained his freedom from a Cuban prison on Friday after serving three and a half years in jail for protesting the communist nation's human rights violations. His release is part of a mass pardon agreement and incremental release of 553 prisoners, a deal brokered by the Vatican.

Cuban authorities detained Rosales Fajardo, pastor of Monte de Sion Independent Church in Palma Soriano, Cuba, on July 11, 2021, after he joined thousands of Cuban citizens in voicing concerns about the regime's treatment of its people. Hundreds were reportedly detained as a result of the demonstrations.

According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Rosales Fajardo was given a seven-year sentence, down from eight, in May 2022 after being convicted on charges of criminal incitement, assault, public disorder, and disrespect.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in September 2024 denounced the imprisonment of Rosales Fajardo and reported that he was tortured while detained.



To read more persecution news from Cuba and other regions, visit www.persecution.org

CITATIONS

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CONCLUSION

Cuba's religious landscape remains governed by an entrenched system of ideological control that conflates independent faith with political dissent. The Office of Religious Affairs enforces draconian regulations on faith communities, while security services wield surveillance, detention, and psychological coercion to silence religious actors.

The detention of pastors for basic acts of Christian service underscores how religious expression is criminalized under the guise of state authority. Moreover, religious organizations' humanitarian responses to worsening economic conditions — amid shortages and blackouts — have been met with fines, confiscation, and harassment, illustrating the state's intolerance even for acts of compassion.

Despite mounting pressure, religious communities continue to serve their congregations and the wider population, often clandestinely or under constant threat, embodying resilience in environments hostile to faith.

Addressing these violations requires international pressure and solidarity — not only for religious freedoms, but also for basic human rights and humanitarian relief. The international community must hold Cuba accountable for its systematic violations of religious freedom — particularly through scrutiny by bodies like USCIRF and sustained engagement by civil society allies.

NICARAGUA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Ministry of Interior: As in other socialist countries, Nicaragua views independent religious organizations as a threat to the total loyalty owed to the state by the people. Whether churches themselves or affiliated organizations engaged in evangelism and social services to the poor, these nongovernmental organizations threaten the government's total control over the people and command significant loyalty in a country with deep Catholic roots.

Nicaragua's Ministry of Interior is a key tool for controlling these religious organizations, since all such organizations must maintain approval from the ministry to operate. In recent years, the ministry has revoked approval for more than 5,000 nongovernmental organizations.¹ In a massive one-day purge in August 2024, the ministry outlawed 1,500 nongovernmental organizations, including many that were religious in nature.² Adding to the difficulty facing these religious groups, the government often seizes organizational assets and exiles or imprisons their leaders.

Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN): The FSLN is a left-wing political party in Nicaragua. It was founded in 1961, inspired by the legacy of Augusto César Sandino, a nationalist who fought U.S. military occupation in the early 1900s. After losing power in the 1990 elections, the FSLN returned under Daniel Ortega, who has ruled since 2007. Under Ortega and his wife, Rosario Murillo, the party has centralized control over all branches of government. Today, the FSLN is widely seen as an authoritarian vehicle used to maintain the Ortega-Murillo family's dominance, suppress dissent, and restrict civil and religious freedoms.

Religious leaders who speak against the government face imprisonment and exile, while Catholic processions and evangelical gatherings are routinely banned or heavily restricted. The FSLN frames dissenting clergy and Christian communities as threats to national security, effectively criminalizing religious expression. By co-opting national institutions and weaponizing ideology, the FSLN has transformed Nicaragua into a state where religious life is tightly policed, and faith communities are among the most visible victims of systemic repression.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Daniel Ortega: President of Nicaragua since 2007, Daniel Ortega has overseen a historic consolidation of power in his own person and a systematic rolling back of civil liberties for citizens. He modified the Constitution to abolish term limits on the president, allowing him to maintain power indefinitely through a succession of staged elections.³ Meanwhile, he has led the government's antagonistic approach to the church, which he sees as a subversive influence working against his claim to absolute power.

Rosario Murillo: Rosario Murillo was officially declared co-president in January 2025 after years of relatively quiet influence over her husband, President Ortega. Murillo now shares formal authority, extending her control over legislation, the judiciary, and regional institutions.⁴ She is working to continue Ortega's legacy of repression over religious groups and has presided over the administration's decisions to imprison and even exile religious leaders from the country altogether.

QUICK FACTS

Region: Latin America

Population: 6.67 million

Religious Demography:

- 84% Christian
- 14% None
- 2% Other

Language:

- Spanish



“The Ortega-Murillo regime has launched an all-out assault on the Catholic church — one of the country’s few remaining independent institutions and a bastion of hope for Nicaraguan believers.”—ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

NATIONALISM

In a shift apparently masterminded by his wife Rosario Murillo, President Ortega came to power in 2007 after a campaign that moved away from the militant visuals and Marxist slogans of earlier Nicaraguan politics in favor of simple white shirts and nationalist slogans attempting to merge Christianity with a singular, politicized national identity.⁵ That nationalist streak has only grown in the years since, with patriotism now weaponized against dissenting clergy, churches, and independent groups.

POLITICS

The political climate of Nicaragua is defined by the Ortega-Murillo regime's absolute consolidation of power. Religious leaders and institutions, once important sources of accountability, are now treated as political adversaries. Clergy are arrested, exiled, or stripped of citizenship if they challenge the regime, while sermons that deviate from state-approved narratives are monitored and suppressed.

This heightened state of tension dates back to 2019, when some Catholic churches chose to shelter student protestors from police violence. This decision prompted a wave of government persecution against the church, which was suddenly seen as a part of the political opposition. While some church leaders are indeed outspoken in their criticism of the current Ortega regime, this perspective ignores the church's long history in the country and its vital role there as a protector of rights and tradition.

EDUCATION

Religious schools have been systematically targeted by Ortega's Ministries of the Interior and Education, which view them not as independent institutions but as extensions of the church and therefore potential centers of resistance. Although Nicaraguan law recognizes the right of religious schools to operate, the government has ignored these protections and pursued an aggressive campaign to weaken or eliminate them, with teachers and administrators facing regular harassment for refusing to comply with ideological controls.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

Arbitrary arrests and politically motivated imprisonments remain a hallmark of persecution in Nicaragua. At least 52 political prisoners remain incarcerated, many of them Christian leaders or faith-driven activists.⁶ Reports document torture designed to break both physical and spiritual resilience. Families of detainees face intimidation, and clergy who speak out risk joining the ranks of the imprisoned.⁷

SURVEILLANCE

Surveillance of religious communities has expanded dramatically. Clergy must file weekly reports with police, outlining planned sermons, activities, and attendance. State agents monitor services, processions, and even private gatherings, creating an atmosphere of fear among congregants. This bureaucratic intrusion normalizes government oversight of faith practices, treating churches like political cells to be controlled.

ICC NEWSROOM

Nicaraguan Pastor Recounts How Time in Prison Reinforced His Faith June 19, 2025

In late December 2023, Nicaraguan Pastor Jose Luis Orozco Urrutia's faith started being tested.

He and 12 others associated with the Evangelical Christian organization Mountain Gateway were charged with money laundering and other spurious charges.

On March 19, 2024, the Fifth District Criminal Court sentenced Urrutia to 12 years in prison and fined him \$80 million. The others arrested also received prison sentences and hefty fines. Their lawyers were barred from speaking with them or examining any files related to the case.

A month before their arrests, 250,000 Nicaraguans attended a Mountain Gateway worship gathering. Members of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), led by President Daniel Ortega, considered the event a threat as Christian beliefs often challenged the FSLN's efforts to merge Marxism with Christianity. Nicaraguan Christians also oppose the political party's attempts to oppress free speech and religious freedom.

Since 2018, Ortega and his wife, Rosario Murillo, have targeted religious organizations, the Catholic church, and whoever speaks against the government and seeks to influence the country.

Nicaragua Cancels Holy Week Festivities for Second Year in a Row April 11, 2025

Government authorities in Nicaragua have halted numerous church-led Lent and Easter celebrations, replacing them in some cases with government-run events designed to give the impression of religious activity during one of Christendom's most important holidays.

In 2024, the government deployed roughly 4,000 police officers to prevent Holy Week processions, a common practice among Latin American churches. Similar enforcement is likely this year, according to experts.

Led by co-presidents Daniel Ortega and Rosaria Murillo, Nicaragua's Sandinista government has exiled hundreds of priests, pastors, and other religious figures in recent years, leaving many communities without leadership. In November 2024, the regime demanded that nuns leave the country by December.

Nicaragua Withdraws from Human Rights Council in Wake of Scathing Report

March 3, 2025

After consolidating power in the presidency earlier this year, Nicaragua withdrew Friday from the U.N. Human Rights Council. Two days earlier, a group of U.N. experts released a strongly worded report rebuking President Daniel Ortega's regime for its systematic crackdown on human rights, democratic norms, and religious groups.

"We are seeing the methodical repression of anyone who dares to challenge Ortega and Murillo's grip on power," said Ariela Peralta, an expert who contributed to the report. "This is a government at war with its own people."

As part of the recent consolidation of power, Ortega announced his wife, Rosario Murillo, as co-president. He has since brought the legislative and judicial branches under his authority.

The Ortega regime claims that the U.N. and the Organization of American States, both of which have issued statements opposing Nicaragua's crackdown on religious groups, are part of an international smear campaign against it. According to Reuters, Murillo denounced the U.N. report as "falsehoods" and "slander."

Though thousands of nongovernmental organizations have lost their legal status due to a murky 2018 law on funding, the Catholic church has been particularly targeted due to its outspoken criticism of the regime's sordid human rights record and its decision to shelter student protestors in 2019.

CITATIONS

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/grhe-nicaragua/a-hrc-58-26-auv-en.pdf>

² <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/latest-purge-nicaragua-outlaws-1500-civil-society-groups-2024-08-19/>

³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/how-ortega-has-stayed-in-power-in-nicaragua-idUSKBN1JK12I/>

⁴ <https://eclj.org/religious-freedom/un/nicaragua-face-a-la-montee-de-la-persecution-religieuse-la-reaction-de-leglise?lng=en>

⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-15544315>

⁶ <https://havanatimes.org/features/nicaraguas-14-missing-political-prisoners/>

⁷ <https://persecution.org/2024/02/15/nicaraguan-priest-speaks-out-on-ortegas-brutal-authoritarian-regime/>



To read more persecution news from Cuba and other regions, visit www.persecution.org

ICC AT WORK

In 2024 and 2025, ICC's advocacy team worked with partners and spearheaded sessions at the International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington, D.C., on topics that included growing Christian persecution in Latin America.

One session, "Faith, Rights, and Resilience: Navigating Religious Liberty in Latin America," focused on laws that hinder religious freedom in Nicaragua, Cuba, Venezuela, Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil, and other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

CONCLUSION

Nicaragua's persecution landscape shows no sign of easing; rather, repression has intensified through a multi-level strategy targeting faith-based communities, civil society, media, and educational institutions. The Ortega-Murillo co-presidency has wielded constitutional power to centralize control and eliminate dissent, while the security apparatus enforces a tightly coordinated system of repression.

Despite Nicaragua's long experience of Christian influence, the Ortega-Murillo regime has come to see religion as an enemy of the state and something to be tightly controlled for fear of allowing a competing loyalty.

Religious actors bear the brunt of this campaign. Clergy endure weekly police oversight, services require approval, and processions are banned. Prisons have become zones of psychological and physical torment for Christian political prisoners. Women and young activists lose vital community and support as NGOs and universities are shut down, and the media is silenced.

The U.S. Department of State added Nicaragua to the Special Watchlist (SWL) of countries with particularly severe violations of religious freedom in 2019, a designation that continued until 2022, when it was raised to the Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) list.

"Catholic clergy and laity continued to experience government harassment," said a 2022 State Department publication citing media reports, "including slander, arbitrary investigations by government agencies based on charges that clergy and laity said were unfounded, withholding of tax exemptions, and denial of religious services for political prisoners."

To reverse this trajectory, sustained international scrutiny, humanitarian solidarity, and robust advocacy mechanisms are urgently needed.

DESIGNATION

COUNTRY STATUS

SWL

CPC

COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR CONCERN: 2023-2026

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1

LEVEL 2

LEVEL 3

LEVEL 4

RECONSIDER TRAVEL to Nicaragua due to arbitrary enforcement of laws, the risk of wrongful detention, and limited healthcare availability. (As of Dec. 13, 2024)

LEGAL TAKE

By ICC Human Rights Counsel

On Oct. 20, 2025, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) published its findings of a nearly year-long investigation into how President Ortega's regime has influenced trade between the U.S. and Nicaragua. The USTR determined, "Nicaragua has engaged in increasingly pervasive abuses... human rights and fundamental freedoms, and has systematically dismantled rule of law protections..."

In its findings, the USTR specifically stated that the "Ortega-Murillo regime has severely restricted the exercise of religious freedom. The regime has taken steps to strip Nicaraguan clergy and religious actors of their citizenships, hounding Nicaraguan and foreign resident religious actors into exile, confiscating property, and punishing free expression of religion or belief with unjust detention, reprisals, and threats."

The USTR summarized its findings by stating the regime has "engaged in a variety of illegal and abusive actions that constitute gross violations of human rights..." (emphasis added) The use of the term "gross violations of human rights" is significant. "Gross violations" is how U.S. law labels the worst human rights crimes that can be committed against an individual.

DANIEL ORTEGA

The power-hungry head of state is working to consolidate government power in the presidency and to destroy all other sources of authority, including the church.

OVERVIEW

Daniel Ortega's long political career began as a revolutionary opposing dictatorship, yet after decades in power, Ortega and his wife, Co-President Rosario Murillo, have fused state, party, and family into a single apparatus of personal control. Elections are choreographed rituals; courts and police serve as instruments of loyalty, and opposition figures face exile, imprisonment, and forced silence.

Even in exile, the long arm of the Ortega regime is active in repressing dissent and suppressing speech. In interviews, Nicaraguan human rights activists and religious leaders have told International Christian Concern (ICC) that they experience regular incidents of transnational repression, with the regime threatening to punish family members or parishioners remaining in Nicaragua if they speak out.

The regime has cracked down on organized religion of many types, including the evangelical church and Moravians, out of fear that they may present a challenge to the total control desired by the Ortega-Murillo government.

While Protestant Christianity has grown rapidly in popularity in Nicaragua in recent decades, the Catholic church remains a critical institution in the country, and more than 30% of the population self-identifies as Catholic.

The regime's most relentless and public campaign is against the Catholic church. Once an ally of the Sandinista revolution, the church

became a perceived obstacle when it defended citizens who were protesting state corruption and repression. In 2018, security forces killed demonstrators, and clergy who offered sanctuary were branded terrorists. Since then, Ortega has expelled Catholic charities, confiscated church property, shut down faith-based universities, and stripped citizenship from prominent priests and bishops. ICC advocated for pastors affiliated with the U.S.-based Mountain Gateway church, which Ortega's regime opposed.

Thousands of nongovernmental organizations have lost their legal status due to a murky 2018 law on funding.

The U.S. Department of State added Nicaragua to the Special Watchlist of countries with particularly severe violations of religious freedom in 2019, a designation that continued until 2022 when it was raised to the Countries of Particular Concern list. The latter designation indicates increased concern about the state of religious freedom in Nicaragua and normally carries with it legislatively mandated sanctions.

"Catholic clergy and laity [have] continued to experience government harassment," a U.S. State Department publication found, citing media reports, "including slander, arbitrary investigations by government agencies based on charges that clergy and laity said were unfounded, withholding of tax exemptions, and denial of religious services for political prisoners."



QUICK FACTS

Official Title: President of the Republic of Nicaragua

Assumed Office: January 2007

Born: 1945 in La Libertad, Nicaragua

Party / Affiliation: Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN)

PERSECUTION MEASURES

IMPRISONMENT AND EXILE

Hundreds of priests, nuns, religious workers, and others associated with religious institutions have been disappeared or detained, often facing exile from Nicaragua after refusing government demands.

CLOSURE OF CHURCH INSTITUTIONS

Faith-based schools, universities, and charities have been seized by the government or shut down based on fabricated charges.

CENSORSHIP, SURVEILLANCE, AND INTIMIDATION

The Ortega regime engages in systematic attempts to control sermons, take over religious media, and surveil members of independent religious organizations.

ICC RECOMMENDATIONS

- Expanded international sanctions against Nicaraguan officials, including Ortega and Murillo, who are responsible for church closures and broad human rights abuses.
- Expedited asylum pathways for exiled clergy and religious workers and institutionalized protections for those experiencing transnational repression from the Ortega regime.
- Support for aid to parishes and civil society organizations shuttered by the regime.
- Global advocacy and support for efforts to document and publicize persecution in Nicaragua.
- Conditional regional cooperation that is based on measurable improvements in religious and civil freedoms.

SUMMARY

- Daniel Ortega, president since 2007, has transformed the country into a police state where religious and civic freedoms are bordering on extinction.
- Together with his wife, who was appointed co-president in early 2025, Ortega has worked to weaken the courts and legislature while consolidating power in the presidency.
- Once hailed as a revolutionary figure, and even one that appealed to religion, Ortega now rules through fear and the systematic persecution of the church, which today stands as one of the last bastions of truth and independence in Nicaragua.
- Since 2018, the Ortega regime has systematically harassed, imprisoned, and expelled priests, nuns, and laity who associate with independent religious groups.
- As persecution of independent religious institutions has ramped up in recent years, so has the need for government surveillance, which it imports from China.

REGIONAL
OVERVIEW

ISSUES AND
TRENDS IN THE

MIDDLE
EAST





*“BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO
ARE PERSECUTED BECAUSE
OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, FOR
THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM
OF HEAVEN.”*

—MATTHEW 5:10

For centuries, the Middle East was the cradle of Christianity and the heart of the world’s great faiths. Today, it is a dangerous place for Christians and other religious minorities. The twin forces of authoritarianism and religious nationalism continue to suffocate freedom of belief, as governments seek to harness faith for political legitimacy while suppressing dissenting voices.

In Iran, the Islamic Republic persists in treating Christianity as a Western contagion. House churches are raided, pastors imprisoned, and converts from Islam labeled as threats to national security. Yet the underground church continues to grow, often led by former Muslims who risk everything to share their faith. In Saudi Arabia, Christianity remains banned from the public square, while Egypt’s Coptic Christians endure discrimination and mob violence despite official promises of reform.

In North Africa, regimes such as Algeria maintain strict controls over worship, closing churches that operate without state approval. Libya and Sudan remain engulfed in chaos, where ethnoreligious identity often determines survival. In Sudan’s civil war, both sides have targeted churches and clergy, turning sanctuaries into ruins.

Religious nationalism has also deepened sectarian divides. Islamist parties and movements present themselves as defenders of faith against perceived Western influence, framing Christians and reformist Muslims alike as enemies of the nation. The resulting social pressure isolates disfavored religious groups even where formal persecution is less visible.

Technology has expanded the reach of repression, with surveillance and online policing increasingly used to monitor religious activity. Yet the same digital space has allowed underground believers to share Scripture and fellowship.

Across the Middle East and North Africa, the Christian presence is growing in spiritual vitality. The faithful who remains embody centuries of unbroken witness. In Iran and Egypt, in Lebanon and Algeria, they stand as quiet yet defiant reminders that light still shines where darkness seeks to prevail.

AZERBAIJAN

Editor's Note: While Azerbaijan is in the South Caucasus region and not considered part of the Middle East, we are including it in this section as our Middle East North Africa team works and has contacts in the region.

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA): The 2009 law On Freedom of Religious Beliefs regulates nearly every aspect of religious practice, subjecting it to strict government review and requiring official registration for all religious groups.

Failure to register can result in raids, arrests, and prosecutions according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's 2025 report.¹ Missionary activity is also tightly restricted, printed religious materials and sermons are carefully scrutinized, and leadership within religious organizations is dependent on government approval.

Azerbaijani Armed Forces: Azerbaijan's military might, bolstered by close relations with Turkey (Türkiye) and Israel, poses a continual threat to the sovereignty of neighboring Armenia, the oldest Christian country in the world and home to many Christian heritage sites. Azerbaijan seized the historically Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023, expelling nearly 100,000 Armenians in a widely condemned act of ethnic cleansing.

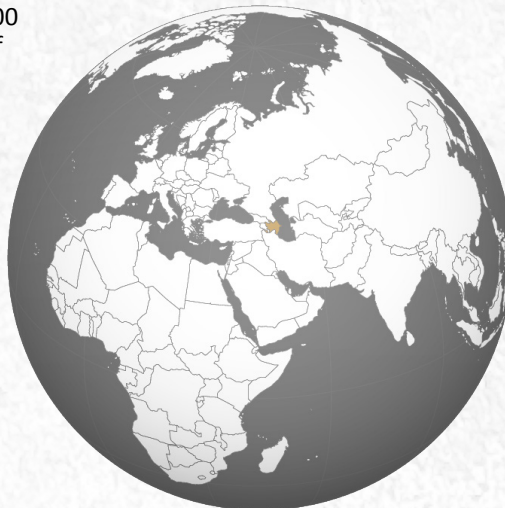
Credible reports from human rights organizations show that Azerbaijani armed forces have regularly engaged in gross violations of human rights, including the torture and killing of captured Armenians.² Satellite analysis shows that many Christian heritage sites have been desecrated or destroyed by Azerbaijan's military.³

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

President Ilham Aliyev: More than 20 years into his rule, President Aliyev has continuously worked to expand his powers while limiting the rights of the people. After winning a second five-year term in 2008, Aliyev led a constitutional referendum to abolish term limits and has declared himself the victor in every election since.

Rights monitors have documented a deepening crackdown on dissent and independent religious expression under Aliyev as the government leverages regional tensions with Armenia and Iran to justify its restrictive policies.⁴

Aliyev oversaw the 2023 annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian enclave, and the corresponding destruction of heritage sites. "Churches and cemeteries have borne the brunt of cultural heritage abuses" in the region, with sacred sites targeted for attack more than secular heritage sites, according to research group Caucasus Heritage Watch.⁵



QUICK FACTS

Region: Caucasus

Population: 10.23 million

Religious Demography:

- 97% Muslim
- 3% Christian

Languages:

- Azerbaijani
- Russian

“Draconian laws on religion and military aggression against its neighbor, Armenia, including the desecration of Christian heritage sites and the ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh, make Azerbaijan a serious threat to religious freedom in the Caucasus.”

—ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

NATIONALISM

Azerbaijani nationalism is closely intertwined with its historic Turkic roots. Though more frequently associated in the modern era with the rhetoric of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkic nationalism is a broader phenomenon that emphasizes Turkic supremacy and territorial gains. Azerbaijan's territorial claims over regions like Nagorno-Karabakh have become central to its national self-identity, reinforcing an image of Azerbaijan as a victim of aggression that must reclaim its rightful land.

In reality, pan-Turkic nationalism is based on historical revisionism that conveniently papers over the rights and territories of its neighbors. In Nagorno-Karabakh, an area with Armenian Christian heritage sites dating back centuries, Azerbaijani nationalism has caused devastating loss.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

While Azerbaijan does not contain laws criminalizing blasphemy — its legal system is secular and even anti-religious despite the predominantly Muslim population — there are strict laws in place to limit conversions and regulate evangelism. Foreigners are prohibited from sharing their faith altogether, with the law terming such activity “religious propaganda.”⁶

POLITICS

Under President Aliyev's leadership, Azerbaijan has become one of the world's most authoritarian regimes, scoring just seven out of 100 points in the widely read Freedom in the World report published annually by Freedom House. That score places it four points behind its southern neighbor, Iran, and highlights the extreme lengths Aliyev's government has gone to in its effort to restrict the people of Azerbaijan. In the category related to religious freedom, Azerbaijan received zero points in the 2025 Freedom in the World report.⁷

While Azerbaijan now allows the formation of opposition political parties, analysts say that this has little effect on the country's political scene as opposition candidates are prevented from holding rallies and are severely limited in their ability to communicate with the electorate via the media.

EDUCATION

Religious education and clerical life remain tightly supervised. Research has found enduring state control over religious institutions, prior approval of curricula, and restrictions on independent study or foreign links. Literature used in religious instruction is subject to prior censorship, discouraging informal teaching and pushing communities into state-sanctioned channels that promote hostility toward groups seen as outsiders, including ethnic Armenians.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

According to the Union for Freedom of Political Prisoners of Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan had 241 prisoners of conscience as of June 2025, compared to 183 at the end of 2023 and 22 at the end of 2022. Reports from inside the country's penal system indicate that torture and threats of extreme violence are used to coerce confessions from the accused.

Often based on falsified drug-possession charges, the arrests of religious figures typically lack legitimacy and are used as a tool to suppress and intimidate anyone who dares stand in the way of the government's absolute control over society. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's 2025 report cited prisoners of conscience who reported abuse, torture, and threats of rape while in state custody.⁸

SURVEILLANCE

Azerbaijan's authorities conduct extensive surveillance of the population, with particular focus on individuals involved in, or linked to, opposition activity. Unlike in many countries where judicial safeguards limit such monitoring, Azerbaijani law enforcement can track internet use and intercept phone communications without independent oversight.

TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

Though the governmental apparatus also provides some degree of funding for religious groups, groups that are approved or funded are forced to justify and defend the government's abuses both domestically and abroad, according to civil society sources that spoke to International Christian Concern (ICC) after facing pressure from groups approved to operate in the country.

Azerbaijan has also long engaged in a military campaign against its neighbor, Armenia, and its citizens, including those living in the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave. Ongoing since 1994, the conflict ended in September 2023 when Azerbaijani forces overwhelmed the region's Armenian defenders and forced a Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement that led to the displacement of nearly the entire Armenian population from the area.

FACES OF THE PERSECUTED

REFLECTIONS FROM ANNA, AN ARTSAKH SURVIVOR

“Today would have been my father’s 70th birthday. He passed away at 53 and is buried in our ancestral cemetery alongside his parents, uncles, and brother in my native village of Sos, Nagorno-Karabakh (also known as Artsakh). For the second year in a row, my family and I have been unable to visit his grave.

On Sept. 19, 2023, Azerbaijan launched a large-scale military offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh, violating the ceasefire agreement of 2020. This triggered the population-wide ethnic cleansing and forced displacement of indigenous Artsakhi Armenians from their ancestral homeland. Since then, we have lost all access to our ancestral lands, beyond just our cemeteries, severing deep ties with our heritage. None of us can honor our loved ones in person any longer.

On this day, bound by grief, we can only gather as a family and share memories of a life marked by deprivation and hardship, but also by moments of happiness, left behind in our lost homeland...

The pain of being unable to visit the graves of loved ones is shared by all my compatriots. Every displaced person now carries their own memories of those left behind.

For Armenians — especially for Artsakhis — graves and the remains of our martyrs carry extraordinary significance. In Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh), martyrs are honored with the greatest respect and remembrance. Honoring their memory has always been the highest moral duty. The land measures its value by the number of those who gave their lives for it. Artsakh, which had once covered an area of 12,000 square kilometers through four wars — from 1988 until the full-scale war on Sept. 19, 2023 — in which more than 12,000 brave souls laid down their lives defending their homeland. That means one red flower for every square meter of this sacred land.

In our consciousness, burial also holds profound psychological importance. The earth cradles the remains; the soil protects them. It is the final embrace, the bearing witness that allows the living to grieve and find some measure of peace.

But today, when all Artsakhis have been forcibly displaced, funerals and memorial rituals take on a new meaning. The forced exile has transformed these ceremonies into one of the few places where displaced Artsakhis still gather, where social bonds endure despite the loss of communal life.

In this fractured existence, funerals have become hubs of encounter and connection. Since the forced displacement, my mother attends these services frequently. Far-flung acquaintances, relatives, even distant neighbors — people she has not seen since school days — come together under these somber roofs once every week or so. These rites weave a fragile web of community from the scattered remnants of lives once shared. Especially when the elderly pass, my mother returns home more composed — sometimes even somewhat soothed.

At funerals and memorial ceremonies, Artsakh Armenians come together to reconnect. They exchange memories and speak of present sorrows and hardships. Elderly women inevitably ask after unmarried daughters, the unemployed, those who have emigrated or remain, their stories unfolding in hushed conversations. Strangers become familiar through the shared experience of loss and yearning.

In these gatherings, people leave behind the physical presence of the deceased and hold each other tightly. There is an intense and urgent need for human contact, for belonging, for reaffirming fragile ties in the absence of a true communal center.

Continued on next page >

DESIGNATION

COUNTRY STATUS

SWL CPC

SPECIAL WATCH LIST:

2023-2026

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1 LEVEL 2 LEVEL 3 LEVEL 4

RECONSIDER TRAVEL to Azerbaijan due to terrorism, armed conflict, and risk of landmines. (As of March 12, 2026)



LEGAL TAKE

By ICC Human Rights Counsel

While small geographically, Azerbaijan is set apart for the sheer boldness of its animosity toward ethnic Armenian Christians formerly within its borders. Ever since Azerbaijan’s military takeover of the Christian-majority region of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), Azerbaijan has systematically destroyed ancient and medieval Christian heritage sites. Human rights experts have condemned Azerbaijan’s “ethnic cleansing” of historical Christian sites.

In addition, Azerbaijan continues to hold several Armenian Christians captives in conditions that violate human rights law. In 2024, ICC concluded after a months-long legal investigation that Azerbaijan had committed war crimes and gross human rights violations against Armenian Christian POWs. ICC’s Advocacy team submitted its findings to the U.S. government requesting sanctions against those responsible.

When an elderly person dies, the mood shifts to quieter conversations and a yearning to share stories from happier days long gone.

My friend Erazik once told me that she now attends so many funerals in Yerevan and nearby communities that her husband has taken to making a dark, bitter kind of humor. He jests that it seems as if she searches online — on some special network of mourning — for the next ceremony to join.

Perhaps the deepest and most painful wound is the impossibility of burial in ancestral lands. The graves of relatives, the resting places of those left behind in Artsakh, are out of reach. At one gathering, I heard the story of an elderly couple from our village who emigrated to Stavropol, Russia — a city home to tens of thousands of Armenians displaced by the first war, the second war, and finally the forced exodus. While attending a relative's grandfather's funeral, the wife noticed the deep anxiety on her husband's face. When she asked the reason, he confessed to a haunting fear: the grave was flooded, as if the coffin rested in a watery pit. "I don't want to be buried in a waterlogged hole in this foreign land when I die," he said, troubled. Trying to lighten his mood, she teased, "Are you afraid you'll catch the flu after you die?"

Their greatest fear, especially the elderly is not only death itself, but the absence of rest even in death — no soil to hold their bones, no sacred ground to call home.

For many descendants of the Armenian Genocide, visiting their ancestral villages in Western Armenia (now part of Turkey), returning to their ancestral lands, and bringing back soil to bury with their loved ones has become a tradition. It's a way of reconnecting with the past. So many lost their lives at Der Zor or on the forced marches, their bones scattered and unknown. Their grandchildren grow up without a grave to visit, no place to feel the presence of their great-grandparents. Bringing home even a handful of earth somehow bridges that impossible distance — linking generations, anchoring memory to the land.

Yesterday, I attended another funeral — the father of a friend, a man who had spent his whole life in Stepanakert, fell ill suddenly and passed away in exile. I went with Yerazik, who is also displaced. Her father and other relatives lie buried in their ancestral family plots back in Artsakh as mine. Standing there beside a freshly covered grave, Yerazik and I shared a silent thought and whispered: perhaps our fathers are, in a way, more fortunate, resting in their homeland, surrounded by their ancestors. It wasn't hard to agree, even though we've been robbed of the chance to visit those graves, to place even a single flower.

Each time I learn that a cemetery has been desecrated or destroyed across Nagorno-Karabakh — it opens a new wound. Reports and satellite images reveal that Azerbaijani forces have destroyed Armenian cemeteries, smashing tombstones, using the stones for construction, and wiping out centuries-old traces of Armenian presence. I fear that our family graves might one day suffer the same fate.

But even if they do, I believe it will change nothing essential. Those who rest beneath those shattered stones are the true owners of that land. Their place in the earth is unshakable — unlike us, who have been torn from our homes."



Territory map of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) under the 2020 peace deal. In September 2023, Azerbaijan overtook the enclave, forcing tens of thousands of people out of their ancestral land.



The flags of Armenia and the non-recognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (Artsakh) at the cemetery in Erevan, Armenia.



Dadivank, built between the ninth and 13th centuries, is an Armenian monastery in the Shahumian Region of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (Artsakh).

ICC NEWSROOM

Azerbaijan-Armenia Agreement Paves Way for Peace but Ignores Religious Freedom Concerns Aug. 14, 2025

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan met last Friday at the White House to sign a joint declaration that may pave the way for increased stability in the region.

The agreement lays the groundwork for economic investment in Armenia and Azerbaijan. It signals a shift away from Russia, which has historically served as a mediator between the two countries, in favor of the United States.

Despite media reports to the contrary, the document signed was not a peace agreement. Rather, it was a joint declaration affirming the importance of working together toward a final peace agreement and emphasizing the importance of forging peace between the fractious countries.

On Monday, Armenia and Azerbaijan published the text of the draft peace agreement referenced in Friday's declaration.

Global leaders were quick to hail the declaration as a historic step, with Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, praising it as "welcome news on the road to lasting peace" and U.K. Foreign Secretary David Lammy calling it a "bold step."

COP29 Host Azerbaijan Accused of 'Greenwashing' Ancient Christian Territory

Nov. 11, 2024 | The COP29 climate change conference started today in Azerbaijan, a country known for its recent ethnic cleansing of Armenian Christians.

The U.N. conference is underway in the capital city of Baku just 14 months after Azerbaijan started ethnically cleansing the historically Christian territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Delegates from nearly 200 countries, including the U.S., are attending the summit.

In September 2023, the Azerbaijani military launched a lightning offensive in the territory after a nine-month blockade. The offensive caused roughly 120,000 people, nearly the entire population of Nagorno-Karabakh, to flee to neighboring Armenia.

The Armenian people are known as the first "Christian nation," having converted to Christianity in A.D. 306. Until 2023, Armenians had lived in Nagorno-Karabakh since at least the first century. Today, the territory is virtually devoid of Christians.

ICC Files Human Rights Sanctions Request Against Azerbaijan Aug. 9, 2024

International Christian Concern (ICC) recently sent U.S. government officials a formal sanctions request against Azerbaijan and prisons where Armenian prisoners of war and Christians were allegedly tortured.

ICC filed the sanctions request with the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Department of the Treasury under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act. The requested sanctions — which include freezing assets and banning travel to the United States — would hold Azerbaijan accountable for its egregious human rights violations.

ICC led a comprehensive, monthslong investigation into Azerbaijan's treatment of Armenian POWs from 2020 to 2021. Researchers pored over hundreds of pages of sworn testimony from victims. They uncovered significant, irrefutable evidence of long-term torture and cruel and unusual punishment supported by the highest levels of the Azeri government.

"The reported cruelty committed against the POWs was consistent and atrocious," said ICC's lead investigator, who discovered gross misconduct by prison officials. "While we recognize the complexities and longstanding hostility between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the blatant attacks and targeting of POWs and Christians were undeniable."

To read more persecution news from Azerbaijan and other regions, visit www.persecution.org

CITATIONS

¹ <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report.pdf#page=52>

² <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/14/video-shows-azerbaijan-forces-executing-armenian-pows>

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⁷ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/freedom-world/2025#CL>

⁸ <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report.pdf#page=52>

⁹ <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2023/oct/5/israeli-arms-quietly-helped-azerbaijan-retake-nago/>

ICC AT WORK

ICC joined a delegation to Armenia along with Christian leaders in summer 2025. The group met with government officials, including Armenia’s president, Vahagn Khachaturyan, toured Christian heritage sites, and interviewed survivors from Artsakh who are assimilating in other parts of Armenia since the takeover of the enclave in September 2023.

ICC filed a Global Magnitsky Sanctions report in 2024 with the U.S. Department of State against leaders at two Azeri prisons.

ICC provided tens of thousands of dollars in aid to Armenian families from Artsakh when Azerbaijan steamrolled that enclave in 2023, forcing more than 100,000 people to flee.

CONCLUSION

In August 2025, a U.S.-brokered peace declaration between Azerbaijan and Armenia — the so-called “Trump Route” agreement — offered a faint glimmer of regional normalization but glossed over critical religious-freedom concerns such as the fate of heritage sites in Nagorno-Karabakh and the return of Armenian hostages held by Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan’s remarkable leverage on the international stage stems from its strategic position on Iran’s northern flank and its resource-rich economy. Decades of authoritarian consolidation and systematic denial of religious freedoms have drawn remarkably little substantive pressure — largely because Western interests in security and energy often overshadow human rights considerations.

Close strategic partnerships with Israel and Turkey underpin this leniency. Israel, seeking strategic depth against Iran, became Azerbaijan’s leading arms supplier in recent years, delivering advanced drones, missile systems, and surveillance technologies that significantly empowered Baku during its 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh campaign. Analysts estimate that from 2016 to 2020, Israel accounted for roughly 70% of Azerbaijan’s major arms imports.⁹ Simultaneously, Turkey, as a regional economic linchpin, not only imports substantial quantities of Azerbaijani oil and gas but also serves as a critical military and diplomatic backer.

This confluence of support enabled Azerbaijan to undertake aggressive territorial expansion and to carry out the destruction or appropriation of key Christian sites in Armenian regions. Yet these acts of cultural and religious erasure have elicited few tangible consequences from its allies or the broader international community.

If the international community continues prioritizing geopolitical and energy imperatives over human rights accountability, the current reality of religious repression in Azerbaijan will persist — entrenched and unchecked. Peace initiatives that omit religious-freedom safeguards are not truly peace; they are a fragile status quo that sanctions suppression under the guise of stability.

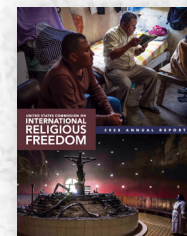
REPORTS



Hope and the Wandering Souls from Artsakh: Reflections on a Delegation Visit
International Christian Concern



2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Azerbaijan
United States Department of State



2025 USCIRF Annual Report: Azerbaijan (p.46)
United States Commission on International Religious Freedom



Erasing Space: Destruction of Armenian heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh
ACLED

EGYPT

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Community-Level Extremists: Despite Christianity's long history in Egypt, which stretches back to the first century and predates the advent of Islam by hundreds of years, many in Egypt's predominantly Muslim population believe that the country's small Christian community deserves fewer rights. This sentiment can manifest in several ways, including the ostracization of converts or protests against Christian religious sites. In some cases, extremists will even kidnap Christian women for marriage or attack church buildings in an ongoing pattern of violence that often receives inadequate response from the government. Egyptian Christians, mostly Copts, live under the constant and amorphous pressure of local extremism, unchecked by the government.

State Legal Apparatus: Unfortunately, local extremists are not the only party in Egypt that seems to believe that Christians should be treated as second-class citizens. Minorities — particularly Coptic women — continue to experience systematic discrimination under the law on matters of family and inheritance, with the courts inconsistently applying the law and sometimes denying Christians the right to live by Christian practice and, instead, applying Sharia.¹ The el-Sisi administration has signaled some willingness to update personal status laws to give more room for Christians, but the final effect of those signals has yet to be seen.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Abdel Fattah el-Sisi: While President el-Sisi has made some effort to project a public image of religious inclusivity, government officials under his leadership continue to persecute the country's small religious minority communities. Credible reports indicate that Christians in prison on religious charges, including Nour Fayeze Ibrahim Gerges, are subject to abuse and torture.² Others are being held without trial, and the courts continue to enforce the country's criminal blasphemy law, which criminalizes the act of "ridiculing or insulting a heavenly religion or a sect following it," according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).³

President el-Sisi has made much of a government effort to restore destroyed churches, but despite the public campaign, thousands of other churches are still waiting for approval to operate legally, according to USCIRF.⁴ In some instances, government permits for churches have prompted mob attacks, with local authorities proving incapable of preventing the violence.⁵

QUICK FACTS

Region: Middle East North Africa

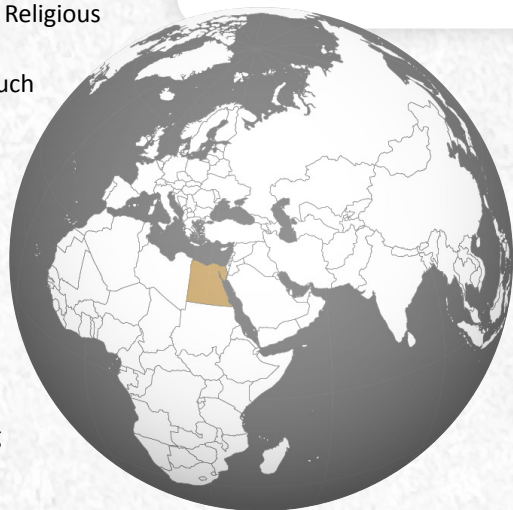
Population: 111.25 million

Religious Demography:

- 85%-90% Muslim
- 10%-15% Christian

Language:

- Arabic



PERSECUTION MEASURES

NATIONALISM

Egyptian nationalism, tied to Sunni Islam, marginalizes religious minorities despite occasional rhetoric from the government about unity and tolerance. The reality, established by the law, enforced by the courts, and implemented in countless communities across the country, is that the full rights of citizenship are reserved for the country's Sunni Islam majority. Members of other faiths, if tolerated at all, are granted only second-class status in this system, and Islam's constitutional primacy pressures Christians to conform culturally or risk alienation. The state's endorsement of Islamic identity as central to nationality reinforces this exclusivity, leaving minorities to navigate a national identity that implicitly excludes them.

EXTREMISM

While large-scale attacks on Christian communities have been mercifully infrequent recently, localized extremism continues to pose a daily threat to Egyptian Christians, and the threat of larger-scale violence always looms. Lack of adequate security across the country and a judiciary that applies the laws only inconsistently amplify the threat faced by these Christian communities.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

Conversion to Christianity, while technically legal in Egypt, carries significant administrative hurdles that present a practical barrier to conversion. Community pressure also adds to the risk of converting to Christianity, with many converts ostracized by their families and communities.

Authorities continue to enforce Article 98(f) of the criminal code, which outlaws blasphemy.⁶ Punishment for blasphemy, or "insulting a heavenly religion," carries with it sentences of up to five years in prison, but the mere accusation of blasphemy can lead to indefinite pretrial detention for those charged, significantly hampering freedom of religious expression across the country.

POLITICS

The el-Sisi government has narrowed the political scene, effectively preventing opposition parties from participating and carefully controlling minority representation in government. According to Egyptian civil society sources who spoke with ICC for this report, many in the Egyptian Christian community self-censor in the political arena out of fear that even the limited place given them in society might be taken away. This means that Christians' political influence, such as it is, typically happens on the government's terms and results in only limited improvement in the government.

EDUCATION

Egypt has made efforts to remove discrimination from the curriculum it uses within its schools, but more work must be done to ensure that the country's educational system does not continue to foment hatred and division among the youth. Despite the removal of some objectionable material, textbooks used in government-run schools still describe Jews as treacherous and Christians as infidels, according to a 2025 USCIRF report.⁷

In addition, the education system in Egypt is woefully overcrowded, understaffed, and underfunded, so families with sufficient means supplement their children's education through private lessons after school. Unfortunately, Christians and other religious minorities pushed to the edges of Egyptian society are often unable to afford these lessons, adding to inequality in a country already deeply divided.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

While current numbers are impossible to verify, Human Rights Watch has estimated that up to 60,000 political prisoners are being detained across Egypt's prison system.⁸ Included in this number are citizens held on religious grounds, including on charges of blasphemy, and others imprisoned under a broad cybercrimes law that the government is widely known to abuse in the name of protecting "the values of Egyptian society" online.

WOMEN

Christian women occupy the lowest ranks of Egyptian society, according to one Egyptian Christian woman who spoke with ICC. Their rights are often ignored, with Muslim men, Christian men, and Muslim women each occupying a higher place in society, she said. In a particularly terrifying example of this reality, Muslim men are known to kidnap Coptic women and girls, marrying them and forcibly converting them to Islam. While authorities sometimes intervene to protect these women, representatives of the Coptic community report that authorities regularly refuse to investigate these cases, leaving the women at the mercy of their kidnappers.⁹

FACES OF THE PERSECUTED

ICC HELPS DRAW ATTENTION TO FORCED MARRIAGES, RELIGIOUS CONVERSIONS IN EGYPT AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Christine walked nervously to the lectern on the fifth floor of the Longworth House Office Building on a sunny June afternoon.

Across the street stood the U.S. Capitol, with its majestic dome and seat of power that symbolizes the freedoms this country enjoys. It was a stark contrast to Christine's journey in the dark corners of the world, where Christian girls and women like her aren't protected.

It took courage for Christine to face a roomful of strangers this summer, no matter how supportive and friendly, and share details of being sexually abused and forced to convert to Islam as a 14-year-old Coptic Christian in Egypt.

Hers was just one survivor's voice, through an interpreter. Still, Christine carried the weight and horror of myriad underage girls and women who have been abducted, sexually abused, forced into unconscionable and ugly fraudulent "marriages," and made to convert to Islam throughout the Middle East. Or in Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, which mirror the same evil.

Underage girls and women have endured abuse and countless indignities for centuries, long before the Islamic State group (ISIS) reared its ugly head and until today. The congressional briefing on Capitol Hill, "Gendered Persecution: Targets of Forced Conversion," highlighted the inability and choice of global leaders to protect the most vulnerable: girls who should be playing with dolls under the watchful eyes of their loving parents, rather than subjecting their bodies and souls to strangers.

Instead, they must endure the malicious intent of outsiders, Islamic laws and cultural norms, forced conversions, and fake marriages to radical Muslim men who are often decades older. Yes, security services can rescue them. Yet their helpless parents are often unable to safely bring them home as they navigate through a

court system that protects the perpetrator rather than the victim.

Whether Christian or Yazidi, Assyrian or Copt, Iraqi or Egyptian, Pakistani or African, or anything in between, the injustices and religious creeds of radical jihadists ripple throughout the Middle East and across the globe. Sharia law, a legislative system that governs citizens based on interpretations of Islam, and cultural norms often take precedence over basic humanity. Evil practices instead of common sense. The violent and extreme interpretations of Islam, rather than moderate voices. The trampling of young souls.

A YOUNG COPTIC CHRISTIAN'S STOLEN CHILDHOOD

"I was the victim of rape at age 14, forced to convert to Islam," said Christine, now 34 and living in the United States as a religious refugee. As a young athlete, she was groomed by a sports trainer who, after sexually assaulting her, falsified documents about her consent and gave her a new Islamic name. If Christine hadn't obliged, "he told me that he would kill my parents and my family."

While Christine's words were heart-wrenching, borne from tragedy and a stolen childhood, the event held in conjunction with Coptic Solidarity's 13th annual conference brought perspectives from notable speakers. They included U.S. Representatives Jim McGovern (D-MA) and Brad Sherman (D-CA), and U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Commissioner Stephen Schneck, Ph.D.

Other advocates included Jamileh Naso, co-founder and president of the Canadian Yazidi Association; Joseph Janssen with Jubilee Campaign & Voice for Justice; and author Sonja Dahlmans. Dahlmans wrote

Coptic Solidarity's recent report, "Hidden Crimes Public Deception: The Epidemic of Abductions and Forced Disappearance of Coptic Women and Girls."

“Girls who should be playing with dolls under the watchful eyes of their loving parents are instead forced to surrender their bodies and souls to strangers.”

Moderator Karmella Borashan, a longtime champion for Assyrian believers and director of advocacy for the Susek Evangelistic Association, said the afternoon briefing served to "raise the voices of the powerless and the voiceless" like Christine's.

International Christian Concern (ICC) has long chronicled the plights of persecuted Christian women

of all ages in the Middle East — hopeful that change can someday occur through the slow and conflicted movements of Washington and foreign governments. ICC's advocacy team works with leaders and pressures foreign regimes that persecute Christians and violate human rights. ICC has served persecuted believers throughout the Middle East and will soon send a petition with 1,000 signatures to Nigeria's First Lady, Oluremi Tinubu, a Christian mother, to address the forced marriages and conversions of young girls in her country. ICC has also helped relocate victims and families in other circumstances.

Christine's testimony moved many to tears, and other speakers corroborated her remarks with data and reports from survivors.

SEEKING JUSTICE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Dahlmans said Egyptian authorities present a positive image of their country to the rest of the world while girls and women are marginalized, abused, and treated as second-class citizens. Dahlmans and a colleague interviewed many victims and relatives of women and girls who were abducted, raped, trafficked, and forcibly converted to Islam. She said the media



Representative photo

often underreport the severity of the problem and the number of victims, while government officials are complicit in the crimes. In Egypt, where the Coptic Church has existed since the first century and believers form just 10% to 15% of the population, Christian women occupy the lowest ranks of society.

“The Egyptian government has no interest in protecting these women or even investigating these crimes and bringing rapists to justice,” Dahlmans said, citing independent sources and groups that support her findings. “It is important to realize that this is not just a case of a story the Copts tell ... there’s no doubt in my mind that what these victims and their families are saying to us is, in fact, true and it is happening.”

As Dahlmans and others toured Capitol Hill and talked with elected officials, many asked: “How do you know it’s true? Do you have proof?”

Dahlmans noted that in the West, victims of sexual crimes can go to the police station where a report is taken, and aid is provided. Justice is served. In Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere dominated

by radical Islamists, Christians who are victims of crimes, whether rape or forced marriage and conversion, are instead interrogated and questioned by police about their “alleged” promiscuity. There are no police reports, let alone recourse or justice.

“
The Egyptian government has no interest in protecting these women or even investigating these crimes and bringing rapists to justice.”

“Girls as young as 9 were sold for \$10 and a pack of cigarettes,” said Naso, co-founder and president of the Canadian Yazidi Association. She said more than 200,000 Yazidis are still in Iraqi displacement camps where they continue to face sexual abuse and limited access to health care and jobs. More than 1,000 are children of rape victims from ISIS fighters, home to an Iraqi government that doesn’t recognize their citizenship yet accepts their Muslim names and heritage.



LEGAL TAKE

By ICC Human Rights Counsel

On the international stage, Egypt enjoys portraying itself as a tolerant, multicultural nation thanks to the presence of its ancient Christian minority. But back at home, it has failed to make good on promised legal reforms that are long overdue.

In the wake of Egypt’s “Arab Spring” revolution in 2011, the sizable Coptic Christian minority was vocal about long-needed changes to oppressive regulations controlling the use and construction of churches. And there was reason for optimism when the 2016 Church Construction Law was finally passed. But nearly a decade later, that optimism has all but vanished. Approximately 2,300 legalization requests for churches are still “pending” (some of which have been waiting for years), local officials use targeted enforcement of fire and building code violations to shut church doors, and some Copts are pressured to use “traditional” settlement methods with those who attack churches rather than pursue justice through the secular court system.

The legal mechanism to ease this choke hold on Egyptian churches already exists, and the local churches themselves have done all in their power to make the government aware of the situation. Egypt’s quite inaction at home speaks far louder than vocal international displays at revealing the true feelings of its government toward the Coptic people.

ICC NEWSROOM

Christian Convert Charged with Terrorism in Egypt July 30, 2025

Egyptian authorities charged Saeid Mansour Abdulraziq, a Christian convert from Islam, with terrorism on July 22 after he requested his identification papers be changed from Muslim to Christian.

Abdulraziq was arrested in Cairo on July 15 after he pleaded to change the documents. Additional charges include “creating unrest” and “spreading misinformation.”

A Cairo-based Christian attorney, Saeid Fayaz, told Christian Solidarity International that many individuals who convert to Christianity in Egypt live difficult lives due to their faith.

“Thousands of Christian converts in Egypt have no rights, and they receive little support,” Fayaz said. “They live in isolation and constant fear.”

In 2016, Abdulraziq converted to Christianity and joined the Russian Orthodox Church in Egypt. He was ostracized by his family and faced harassment after publicly proclaiming the gospel.

After moving to Russia in 2018 and criticizing Islam, Abdulraziq was imprisoned for one year before being deported back to Egypt in 2024. It wasn’t until he applied for a change in his documents reflecting his Christian identity that Egyptian authorities arrested him.

Two Christians Released in Egypt After 3 Years in Prison Feb. 7, 2025

On Jan. 31, two Christian men, Abdulbaqi Said Abdo and Nour Gerges, were released from prison in Egypt after spending more than three years behind bars.

Both men were arrested in 2021 on blasphemy-related charges after participating in a Facebook group that discussed and helped individuals who had converted from Islam to Christianity.

Though the men have been released, Egyptian authorities haven’t formally dropped the charges in their cases.

Upon his release, Abdo spoke of his suffering while in prison and expressed gratitude for the support he received during his detainment. In August 2024, he launched a hunger strike to protest the Egyptian government’s treatment of him while he was incarcerated.

“I endured many hardships in prison,” Abdo said in a report from ADF International. “It isn’t right that a government should tear me away from my family, keep me in these awful conditions, only because of the faith in which I peacefully choose to believe.”

“I thank everyone who prayed for me while I was in prison, cared about and followed up on my case, and shared the joy of my release from prison.”

Islamists Attempt to Block Church Construction in Upper Egypt

May 3, 2024

A group of Islamists gathered on Friday, April 26, in the village of Al-Koum Al-Ahmar, Maghagha, Minya, to protest the construction of a church building.

After the protests, a local Christian provided insight into the events, stating that the Evangelical church in Kom al-Ahmar had applied for a permit to build a church building on land purchased in 2000, finally receiving approval in October 2023. However, opposition arose from the community, citing an Orthodox church already in the village. Upon encountering resistance, local Christian community representatives sought support from local authorities.

The proposed Evangelical church aims to serve more than 2,000 worshippers in Kom Al-Ahmar, Al-Najjarin, and Shebib, filling a significant need as the nearest Evangelical church is located far away in the village of Adamu. Emphasizing their right to worship and conduct their religious practices peacefully, the Christian community stressed that they had followed legal procedures and obtained official permission to build the church building.

To read more persecution news from Egypt and other regions, visit www.persecution.org

REPORTS



Egypt 2023 International Religious Freedom Report
U.S. Department of State



USCIRF Annual Report 2025 Egypt (p.50)
United States Commission on International Religious Freedom



Country Update February 2025: Egypt
United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

ICC AT WORK

- Relocation and holistic aid for Christians who must flee unsafe situations, particularly after putting their faith in Christ.
- Farms and small businesses enable Christians who have suffered from decades of abuse for their faith to establish sustainable sources of income.
- Seven Hope House schools serve more than 1,100 students in mostly rural, impoverished communities.
- Pastor and ministry support throughout the region through prayer, relationships, and financial aid.
- ICC supported an event on Capital Hill, “Gendered Persecution: Targets of Forced Conversion,” sponsored in part by Coptic Solidarity.

CONCLUSION

Despite tentative efforts at reform, Egypt remains entrenched in centuries-old patterns of discrimination against its Christian population. Even the community’s limited space in society is weaponized against it, with the el-Sisi government’s purge of political opposition underscoring the risks faced by minorities who demand their rights in a system designed to favor those in power.

The state projects a veneer of inclusion — restoring churches, celebrating Christian heritage, and advancing selective reforms — yet simultaneously strengthens mechanisms of censorship, discrimination, and surveillance. Education and media continue to embed intolerance, while Christians remain vulnerable to social hostility and slow or absent institutional protection.

Real progress requires more than symbolic gestures. Egypt must commit to genuine religious freedom by reforming curricula to foster mutual respect, consistently enforcing personal status reforms, prosecuting abductions and sectarian violence, and dismantling bureaucratic roadblocks to church construction and identity recognition. Only then will Egyptian Christians be able to live as equal citizens in their homeland.

CITATIONS

¹ <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2025-02/2025%20Egypt%20Country%20Update.pdf>

² <https://www.uscifr.gov/nour-fayez-ibrahim-gerges>

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⁴ <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report.pdf#page=56>

⁵ <https://www.persecution.org/2024/04/24/islamic-extremists-set-fire-to-homes-in-southern-egypt-prevent-christians-from-fleeing/>

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⁸ <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/prison-atlas-details-egyptian-cases-prisoners-and-judges/>

⁹ <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2025/01/29/coptic-solidarity-publishes-revealing-report-on-early-forced-marriage-conversion-of-coptic-women-and-girls-in-egypt/>

DESIGNATION

COUNTRY STATUS

SWL

CPC

SPECIAL WATCHLIST:
2023-2026

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1

LEVEL 2

LEVEL 3

LEVEL 4

EXERCISE INCREASED CAUTION in Egypt due to terrorism, crime, and health. (As of July 15, 2025)

BY THE NUMBERS

60

CHRISTIANS ARRESTED

Between July 1, 2024, and July 1, 2025

**THESE FIGURES
REPRESENT ONLY
A SMALL PORTION
OF THE LARGER
PERSECUTION
PICTURE.**

International Christian Concern (ICC) partners with the International Institute for Religious Freedom to support its Violent Incidents Database.

MIDDLE EAST

IRAN

PLEASE NOTE: THIS PUBLICATION WAS FINALIZED AS WAR BROKE OUT IN IRAN IN MARCH 2026. DUE TO RAPIDLY EVOLVING EVENTS, SOME DETAILS MAY HAVE CHANGED.

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps

(IRGC): The IRGC continues to suppress dissent and enforce ideological conformity in areas of its control both within Iran and without. A powerful combination of military, political, and ideological influence make the IRGC a uniquely potent tool for Iran's Supreme Leader and one that he uses regularly to suppress the rights of Christians and minority communities that challenge his religious nationalist viewpoint. After Israeli and American attacks in mid 2025 made the Iranian regime look weak and ineffective, the IRGC stepped up its efforts at internal suppression, stamping out signs of discontent and cracking down on individuals perceived to be threats against the regime.¹

Morality Police: Diversity of religious opinion is considered a threat to national security in Iran. Consequently, the government places a high priority on enforcing its narrow interpretation of Islamic law on all citizens, severely hampering the rights of Christians and even fellow Shia Muslims. The Morality Police force, also known as the Guidance Patrol, is the street-level enforcer of this restrictive political philosophy. Thousands strong — its Tehran unit alone has had as many as 7,000 officers at once — the Morality Police enforce religious laws, notably laws on the behavior and dress of women.² Arrests and assaults of women violating Sharia dress code have risen, underscoring the state's authoritarian enforcement of religious norms.³

Ministry of Justice: Iran leads the world in documented executions, with at least 972 in 2024, according to a 2025 report by Amnesty International.⁴ Among the executed are an unknown number of prisoners of conscience, with Amnesty reporting that the global rise in executions is "having a disproportionate impact on those belonging to ethnic or religious

minorities and from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds." While the Iranian government allows some degree of freedom for historically non-Muslim communities, converts from Islam to Christianity are viciously persecuted and are treated as a national security threat.⁵

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Iman Afshari: If the Morality Police are the street-level enforcers of Iran's hardline religious statutes, the judiciary is the unstoppable force backing them up. One of the most notorious members of the judiciary is Judge Afshari, a presiding judge in Branch 26 of Tehran's Revolutionary Court who has issued more than 380 sentences totaling some 1,147 years in prison for perceived enemies of the state.⁶ His victims include women found in violation of the laws on religious dress and religious minorities among others.⁷ In one case he sentenced two Baha'i women — members of a religious minority community roughly the same size as the Christian community — to 10-year terms in prison after a trial that lasted just one hour.⁸

Sham trials like this are unfortunately common in the Revolutionary Courts where judges wield extraordinary discretionary power and act as investigator, prosecutor, and judge all in one. The Revolutionary Court's purview includes a broad range of cases deemed threatening to the regime including cases related to national security, blasphemy, apostasy, and political dissent. These courts are the primary venue for prosecuting religious minorities, including Christians.

QUICK FACTS

Region: Middle East North Africa

Population: 88.38 million

Religious Demography:

- 99% Shia Muslim
- 1% Other

Languages:

- Persian



“Despite decades of persecution from a brutal, theocratic regime in Tehran, the church in Iran continues to thrive in defiance of one of the world’s severest violators of religious freedom.”

—ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

NATIONALISM

Iranian nationalism is impossible to separate from the country's intense pursuit of religious homogeneity. Despite more than 99% of the country ascribing to Shia Islam, the government is not content to leave religious minorities in peace, instead framing any dissent as betrayal. The state has exploited religious nationalist sentiment to justify repression of ethnic minorities such as the Kurds and religious minorities such as the Christians and Baha'i. Such framing intensifies persecution, encouraging public denunciation of minority faith communities as threats to national identity.

EXTREMISM

The hard-liners ruling Iran have intensified ideological control, particularly via extreme interpretations of Sharia. Expanded death-penalty laws and arbitrary executions reflect extremism embedded within state policy. Minority religious communities — especially Christian converts who fall afoul of Sharia prohibitions on conversion — are targeted as extremist threats, fueling violent state responses and justifying extremism within the country.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

Insulting Islam and converting to Christianity — or encouraging others to do so — are punishable with the death penalty under Iranian criminal law. Iran's blasphemy law is particularly egregious, written so broadly as to include nearly all religious opinions contrary to the Sharia interpretation of Islam. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom ranks Iran's blasphemy provisions as the worst in the world.⁹

Proselytization by Christians is strictly banned under Article 500(2) of the penal code, which criminalizes "any deviant educational or proselytizing activity" that promotes a religion other than Islam, defining such activity as "making false claims in religious fields." Expressing belief in the divinity of anyone other than Islam's Allah can result in severe punishment, including death.

POLITICS

The political climate in Iran remains violently repressive. After strikes by Israel and the U.S. in 2025, the regime cracked down on dissent — arresting hundreds and executing prisoners swiftly. In May 2025, nationwide labor strikes by truckers, nurses, and farmers revealed the regime's inability to manage economic grievances. These political flashpoints have been met with repression, contributing to further persecution.¹⁰

EDUCATION

The government allows some religious minority communities with long historic roots in Iran to conduct religious education for students, but this access is limited to students who can trace their lineage to a recognized minority group before the 1979 revolution. Everyone else is considered Muslim, and non-Muslims who cannot prove their lineage to the government's satisfaction are legally considered Muslim. Government schools require students to study Sharia law and, unfortunately, perpetuate hateful stereotypes against minorities like Christians and Jews. Christian students are denied access to universities and face other educational barriers as well.

JUSTICE SYSTEM

Unlike many systems where the prosecutor must prove a case before an impartial judge, Iranian Revolutionary Court judges typically initiate investigations, interrogate defendants, accept or reject evidence, and issue sentences.¹¹ In practice, they act simultaneously as investigator, prosecutor, and judge, meaning defendants face a tribunal stacked entirely against them. Trials are frequently closed, defense lawyers are restricted or barred from participation, and vague charges like "acting against national security" or "propaganda against the state" are standard.

SURVEILLANCE

Iran has invested significantly in the development of surveillance technology to enforce its theocratic vision for the country. To fuel this effort, Iran is turning to China — a pioneer in the effort to control citizens through surveillance — for guidance and technology. Drones, facial-recognition cameras, and the Nazer phone app enable systematic monitoring of women's dress and behavior. These technologies normalize public reporting and enable arbitrary arrests, making citizens complicit in their own repression.

WOMEN

Women bear the brunt of the regime's harsh ideological enforcement. The regime's treatment of women — especially its rigid moral code dictating female behavior in public — has become a major source of public anger in Iran and the driving force behind high-profile protest movements. From prohibiting women from appearing in public alone to imposing exacting rules on how the hijab must be worn, the government has worked to control nearly every facet of women's lives under the guise of morality.

FACES OF THE PERSECUTED

NASER NAVARD GOLTAPPEH

Imprisoned since: February 2025

In February 2025, Naser Navard Goltapeh was detained by Iranian authorities for his Christian faith as a convert. He was arrested alongside several other Christians without any charges and sent to the infamous Evin Prison. Goltapeh had previously been imprisoned from 2016-2022.



In May 2025, Goltapeh was hospitalized after suffering a stroke related to a 35-day hunger strike where he protested solitary confinement. He spent two days in the hospital and was sent back to Evin.

Goltapeh was temporarily moved to another prison in June 2025, with reports stating that the conditions were “overcrowded and unsanitary.” He returned to Evin again in August 2025.

Please join us in praying for Goltapeh and the Christian converts arrested alongside him in Iran. Pray for their continued strength and unwavering faith. Pray that God would comfort them in their solitude and fill them with his abundant love.

IRANIAN CHRISTIAN (AND OTHERS) STILL SEEKS U.S. ASYLUM AFTER ONE YEAR

ICC staff raised awareness and advocated for several persecuted Christians seeking asylum in the United States or elsewhere.

Artemis Ghasemzadeh, a 27-year-old Iranian woman, and other Christian asylum seekers in Panama were given an extension in Summer 2026 to find a new home.

Ghasemzadeh is in a Panama City hotel with two Christian families from Iran. They were first given 30 days to stay in Panama, and additional reprieves to find a haven until June 2026.

ICC, nonprofits, government agencies such as the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), and Christians globally followed their case, praying and advocating for them since The New York Times broke their story in February.

The Iranian believers will face extreme persecution if returned to Iran. ICC sent an emergency petition on Ghasemzadeh’s behalf, signed by 1,302 people, to 10 refugee-friendly Western countries, including Germany, Spain, France, and Italy.

Their case also caught the attention of U.S. Rep. (D-Ariz) Yassamin Ansari, an Iranian American, who introduced the Artemis Act in Congress. The bill would stop the expedited removal of refugees fleeing countries known to persecute Christians and other religious minorities. Under the law, the refugees could claim asylum in a U.S. immigration court.

Armenian, Assyrian, and Catholic communities exist in Iran. Yet, like other Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East and beyond, Iran has strict anti-conversion laws that are punishable by imprisonment or death. Ghasemzadeh and Christian converts worshipped as part of Iran’s growing underground church community.

“In Iran, being a Christian when you’re born is OK,” Ghasemzadeh told ICC.

“There are even beautiful churches. But if you’re a Muslim and you convert to Christianity, it’s a problem. The police want to catch you because it’s not good for [the country].”

DESIGNATION

COUNTRY STATUS

SWL CPC

SPECIAL WATCH LIST:

2023-2026

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1 LEVEL 2 LEVEL 3 LEVEL 4

DO NOT TRAVEL to Iran due to the risk of terrorism, unrest, kidnapping, arbitrary arrest of U.S. Citizens, and wrongful detention. (As of Dec. 5, 2025)



LEGAL TAKE

By ICC Human Rights Counsel

Iran, one of the most infamous modern persecutors of Christians in the world, is oddly particular about the kinds of Christians it persecutes. In fact, there are historical orthodox Christian communities (usually Georgian and Armenian) that are, relatively speaking, ignored by Tehran, and the bordering Christian nation of Armenia is one of Iran’s primary trading partners. The fact Iran even officially recognizes its ethnic Christian population puts it above several more “moderate” Islamic nations.

What Iran despises, and what its laws punish most severely, is conversion to Christianity. Both evangelist and Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) who leave Islam for Christ face a deadly gauntlet of apostasy and blasphemy laws carrying sentences of prison, corporal punishment, and death. When these Christians are put on trial, in addition to their religious offenses, they may also be accused of treason-related crimes like “acting against national security,” “leading an organization that aims to disrupt national security,” and “propaganda activity of deviant Christian Zionist beliefs opposed to the system of the Islamic Republic of Iran.” (USCIRF, 2025)

ICC AT WORK

ICC has previously filed a Global Magnitsky sanctions request with the U.S. Department of State against Iran's notorious Evin Prison.

The ICC advocacy team's prison letter writing program included Christian prisoner Naser Navard Goltapeh, housed in Evin, in its outreach this year.

ICC's regional director and team for the Middle East and North Africa, keeps close tabs on the underground church and government developments in Iran.

CONCLUSION

Iran's persecution landscape has continued to intensify across multiple fronts. Under Supreme Leader Khamenei, the regime is doubling down on ideological control through execution, surveillance, and legal repression. Women remain a central target, subjected to cyber-enabled policing of the hijab and brutal enforcement, like shootings and paralysis. Religious minorities face an increasingly lethal environment: converts from Islam are arrested, imprisoned, and executed under sweeping blasphemy and national-security laws that criminalize faith and dissent. The judiciary and security apparatus facilitate this assault, ensuring ideological conformity through sham trials and death sentences.

Western governments have struggled to instigate meaningful improvements for Iran's religious minority population. Despite the lack of outside aid, the Christian church in Iran is one of the fastest-growing Christian populations in the world, according to experts familiar with the topic. Though still a tiny part of the population, Iranian Christians are proving resilient to the government pressure that surrounds them every day.

CITATIONS

¹ <https://www.persecution.org/2025/07/07/iran-cracks-down-on-dissenters-after-12-day-war/>

² <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/05/03/476511439/springtime-in-iran-means-the-morality-police-are-out-in-force>

³ <https://apnews.com/article/iran-protests-un-report-mahsa-amini-hijab-e6d33c4f45f0181b9bc4669aef196209>

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⁶ <https://ipa.united4iran.org/en/judge/566>

⁷ https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op_ed/2024/09/27/u-s-should-sanction-irans-brutal-judge-iman-afshari/

⁸ <https://www.uscifr.gov/release-statements/uscifr-condemns-sentencing-bahai-women-iran>

⁹ <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Blasphemy%20Laws%20Report.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.persecution.org/2025/07/07/iran-cracks-down-on-dissenters-after-12-day-war/>

¹¹ https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2002/08/iran_attacks_justice_27_08_2002.pdf

REPORTS



**2023 Report on
International Religious
Freedom: Iran**
U.S. Department of State



**USCIRF Annual Report 2025
Iran (p. 24)**
*United States Commission
on International Religious
Freedom*

BY THE NUMBERS

123

CHRISTIANS ARRESTED

Between July 1, 2024, and July 1, 2025

24

CHRISTIANS SENTENCED

82

**FORMS OF PHYSICAL
OR MENTAL ABUSE**

**THESE FIGURES
REPRESENT ONLY
A SMALL PORTION
OF THE LARGER
PERSECUTION
PICTURE.**

International Christian Concern (ICC)
partners with the International Institute
for Religious Freedom to support its
Violent Incidents Database.

SAUDI ARABIA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Presidency of State Security (SSP): The SSP is Saudi Arabia's domestic state security and intelligence apparatus, tasked with controlling the country's population and policing its loosely defined anti-terrorism laws. Working closely with the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC), the SSP drives investigations that funnel peaceful speech and minority religious activity into "terrorism" cases before the SCC, which weighs the charges and has become known for its particularly harsh sentencing practices. SSP operations remain opaque and often rely, according to reports, on forced confessions. Together with the SCC, the SSP continues to chill non-Sunni worship through baseless investigations and wanton disregard for the basic tenets of due process.¹

Ministry of Islamic Affairs: The Ministry of Islamic Affairs regulates mosques, preachers, religious literature, and public religious activity, enforcing the state's approved Sunni doctrine. The ministry's posture — framed as an effort to counter extremism — narrows permissible discourse and restrict Shia practices and any non-Muslim worship in public. While some official messaging emphasizes moderation, enforcement remains one-way: non-Sunni activities risk sanction if visible. The ministry's administrative control over religious life remains a central lever of conformism rather than pluralism.²

Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV):

Saudi Arabia's entire legal system is based on Sharia law, with the result that everything from high level regulations on religious organizations to everyday life for citizens are impacted by the monarchy's interpretation of the Quran and Islamic tradition. The CPVPV is responsible for enforcing these interpretations at the street level, with a particular focus on ensuring that the public's behavior at mosques and other religious sites strictly comply with Islamic standards.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Abdulaziz bin Mohammed Al-Howairini:

Al-Howairini oversees the SSP, which integrates domestic intelligence, counterterrorism, and high-tech surveillance. Under his leadership, the SSP's mandate continues to blur peaceful religious expression with "extremism," seeding SCC cases that yield lengthy sentences. The SSP's investigatory dominance shapes who is targeted and how evidence is framed, while secrecy prevents meaningful accountability. Al-Howairini's SSP remains the front-end gatekeeper of what religious expression is tolerated and what is criminalized, entrenching a climate of fear that extends from Shia communities to expatriate house churches.



QUICK FACTS

Region: Middle East North Africa

Population: 36.54 million

Religious Demography:

- 97% Muslim*
- <3% Other

Language:

- Arabic (official)
- Urdu
- Bengali

**These numbers ignore the country's large expatriate population, which makes up about 45% of the population.*

“Despite attempts to whitewash its abysmal record on religious freedom, Saudi Arabia remains among the world’s most religiously restrictive regimes.” —ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

NATIONALISM

State-led nationalism under its Vision 2030 campaign continues to conflate loyalty with adherence to the approved Sunni narrative and deference to the monarchy. Official messaging emphasizes moderation, yet the legal infrastructure — Basic Law, counterterrorism, cybercrime — still penalizes divergent religious expression. Freedom House again classified Saudi Arabia as “Not Free” in 2025, noting the lack of meaningful political participation and systemic restrictions on expression.³

EXTREMISM

Authorities frame wide swaths of peaceful activity as extremism, justifying surveillance, arrests, and SCC prosecutions. Online expression can draw years-long terms under the Counterterrorism Law, even as the state touts moderation. The same legal tools are applied to Shia activists and perceived blasphemy, conflating theological dissent with security threats.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

Apostasy and blasphemy remain criminal offenses, with potential capital punishment in law, and proselytization by non-Muslims is prohibited. Apostasy is punishable by death, while blasphemy can result in floggings, long terms in prison, and large fines.

Saudi Arabia is one of the few countries in the world with anti-blasphemy laws but no prescribed punishment, the others being Afghanistan and Eritrea. However, this does not mean that the consequences for blasphemy are light. In fact, according to a survey of blasphemy laws around the world by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, “penalties imposed [by Saudi judges] are among the harshest in practice,” with the law’s lack of clarity giving judges and prosecutors free reign to seek extraordinarily harsh punishments for relatively inconsequential actions.⁴

POLITICS

While not a pure theocracy in the sense of a government led by the top religious leader, Saudi Arabia flirts with theocratic rule through the centuries-old hereditary rule of the Al Saud family and its devotion to Islamic law as the foundational principle of law and society. Mohammed bin Salman — crown prince, prime minister, and de facto leader of the country — has concentrated security, justice, and religious administration within his own purview and has continued to control the SSP, the SCC, and other institutions of state authority.

Despite much vaunted prisoner releases or interfaith spectacles meant for international media consumption, bin Salman continues absolute prohibitions on public non-Muslim worship and proselytization and enforces a rigid approach to enable reformist optics without structural protections for religious freedom.

JUDICIAL SYSTEM

Saudi Arabia remains one of the world’s leading implementors of the death sentence, with a 2025 report by Amnesty International documenting more than 345 executions in 2024, putting it behind Iran at 972 but well ahead of Iraq, which executed 63 prisoners that year. While those executed faced a range of charges, many were held on vague national security grounds. Amnesty, in its report, found that religious minorities were among those most disproportionately affected by executions globally, along with human rights defenders and dissidents more broadly.⁵

DESIGNATION

COUNTRY STATUS

SWL

CPC

COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR CONCERN: 2023-2026

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1

LEVEL 2

LEVEL 3

LEVEL 4

RECONSIDER TRAVEL to Saudi Arabia due to risk of Iranian drone and missile targeting of American interests, armed conflict, terrorism, exit bans, and local laws regarding social media activity. (As of March 13, 2026)

REPORTS



2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Saudi Arabia
U.S. Department of State



USCIRF Annual Report 2025 - Saudi Arabia (p. 42)
United States Commission on International Religious Freedom



Freedom in the World 2025 and 2026 (Website)
Freedom House



Country Update (August 2024): Saudi Arabia
United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

ICC NEWSROOM

Persecution Continues in Saudi Arabia Despite Claims of Reform Oct. 1, 2024

Long an indispensable player on the international stage because of its vast oil and gas reserves, Saudi Arabia has historically felt little need to abide by international human rights norms or even to pretend that it cared. Little has changed in the Islamic theocracy since its modern founding in 1930. However, various eras have brought varying levels of focus on the enforcement of Islamic law on Christians and other non-Muslims.

Though efforts were made in 2022 to codify the law, Saudi Arabia operates under a mostly unwritten version of Sharia law that gives prosecutors and judges extremely wide latitude as they prosecute even the most minor infractions of Sharia law. The royal Al Saud family, after which the country is named, carefully manages the judicial system, using it as a powerful tool to quell political and religious dissent.

In Saudi courts, confessions are sometimes obtained through torture, according to human rights groups, and defendants lack access to legal representation during their court proceedings. The country's lack of a written criminal code means that judges are free to sentence at will and, according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, hand down some of the harshest sentences in the world for crimes like blasphemy.

Blasphemy and apostasy are both crimes under Saudi law, with punishment for these violations of Islamic morality including large fines, long terms in prison, floggings, and even death. However, the kingdom has not implemented the death penalty for some time. The country's blasphemy law, in essence, outlaws the expression of minority religious belief, while the ban on apostasy prevents Muslims from leaving Islam for another faith. Combined with the idea — taught in schools — that all infants are born Muslim, this leaves little room to identify with any faith other than Islam.

To read more persecution news from Saudi Arabia and other regions, visit www.persecution.org

CITATIONS

¹ <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-12/2021%20Saudi%20Arabia%20Specialized%20Criminal%20Court.pdf>

² <https://freedomhouse.org/country/saudi-arabia/freedom-world/2024/Criminal%20Court.pdf>

³ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/saudi-arabia/freedom-world/2025>

⁴ <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Blasphemy%20Laws%20Report.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act50/8976/2025/en/>

Saudi Arabia Loses Bid for Seat on Human Rights Council Oct. 15, 2024

In voting last week at the U.N. General Assembly in New York, representatives rejected Saudi Arabia's bid for membership on the influential Human Rights Council. Voting for a spot on the council is broken up geographically, with six countries vying for five open spots. The Marshall Islands won the fifth seat, beating Saudi Arabia by just seven votes.

Saudi Arabia has previously sat as a member of the Human Rights Council, most recently for a three-year term beginning in 2017. Saudi Arabia's unsuccessful bid was in the only competitive race for a seat on the council, with the number of candidates matching the number of open slots in every other region. The United States announced last month that it would not seek reelection to the council.

"We are relieved that enough states took their record on human rights into account when voting," said Madeleine Sinclair, director for the New York office of International Service for Human Rights. "Saudi Arabia's record is a laundry list of the kinds of abuses the Council should seek to address."

China Brokers Deal Restoring Diplomatic Relations Between Iran, Saudi Arabia

March 22, 2023

China recently brokered a diplomatic agreement to normalize relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, two historic rivals. The deal marks a significant shift in the Middle East's geopolitical balance of powers and provides important insight into Beijing's aspirations in the region and beyond.

Iran and Saudi Arabia have been at war for years, largely via proxy conflicts across the region. Extremism reached its height in 2016 when violent events between the two powers boiled over. Protestors ransacked the Saudi embassy in response to Saudi Arabia's killing of Shiite leader Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, in a full break of relations between Tehran and Riyadh. In response to the protests, Riyadh closed its embassy and has spent the last seven years investing in other regional pacts, including with other Gulf Arab states and the United States, and in proxy wars designed to counter Iranian influence in the region.

Potentially reversing these years of tensions, Iran and Saudi Arabia reached a normalization agreement earlier this month after five days of meetings in Beijing and over a year of diplomatic talks in Iraq and Oman.



Al Ula, Saudi Arabia: Maraya Concert Hall and Cultural Center in the desert of Ashar Valley. The modern building exterior is clad in mirrors, blending it into the surrounding landscape.



Aerial drone photo captured at dusk in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

CONCLUSION

Despite occasional attempts to whitewash its record on religious freedom, Saudi Arabia remains steadfast in elevating Islam above all other beliefs. A network of laws — many uncodified and rooted in vague interpretations of Sharia — relegates non-Muslims to second-class status and criminalizes blasphemy, effectively suppressing minority religious beliefs and expression. The constitution, according to the 1992 Saudi Basic Law of Governance, is the Quran and the Sunna, or traditions of the Prophet Mohammed, leaving few real constraints on the monarchy.

Considering Saudi Arabia's consistently egregious record on religious freedom, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended its designation as a Country of Particular Concern every year since 2001, when it began issuing such recommendations.

Saudi Arabia sustains its system of extremism and repression largely because its vast energy reserves make it indispensable on the international stage. However, as crucial as its resources may be, the international community cannot afford to ignore its blatant human rights violations and should renew efforts to challenge the kingdom's repression of religious minorities.

AHMED AL-SHARAA

Al-Sharaa represents the end of Assad's tyranny and the beginning of an uncertain new era.

OVERVIEW

Al-Sharaa is a former militant commander who rose to lead HTS and — after organizing the collapse of the Assad regime in late 2024 — was installed as the transitional president of Syria by the new revolutionary leadership.

Once a shadowy jihadi commander, al-Sharaa has quickly moved from battlefield emir to head of a fragile transitional administration attempting, with mixed signals, to convert wartime authority into governing power.

While al-Sharaa's new government has promised to protect religious minorities and their place in society, such an inclusive effort must overcome decades of tension between communities and is far from a sure conclusion.

Al-Sharaa has made many statements extolling the virtues of religious tolerance and has engaged in concrete steps to ensure their safety.

"Diversity is our strength, not a weakness," al-Sharaa declared in an edict upon capturing Aleppo en route to Damascus in December 2025.

Still, HTS-aligned fighters reportedly went door to door when they first captured Damascus asking residents to identify their faith, suggesting that religion may continue to act as a point

of tension. Al-Sharaa is an avowed proponent of the Salafi-jihadist ideology and has much deeper roots as a persecutor of religion than a promoter of its free practice.

Part of the inconsistent messaging may lie in the fact that al-Sharaa has always been focused on opposing the Assad regime, rather than clearly establishing his own positive vision for the country.

Some analysts predict that al-Sharaa's deep roots in Islamic jihad will lead to further attacks against Christians. He began his career with the Islamic State group in Iraq, before creating his own al-Qaida-aligned militant group in Syria.

Other analysts argue that al-Sharaa's main concern will be to rebuild a country torn by decades of war — something that will require international cooperation and may incentivize al-Sharaa to respect international human rights norms.

As the international community watches to see what type of government will replace the Assad regime, hundreds of thousands of religious minorities and Christians in Syria are watching too. For them, the new government's respect for religious freedom is an intensely personal unknown.



QUICK FACTS

Official Title: Transitional President of the Syrian Republic

Assumed Office: December 2024

Born: 1986 in Aleppo, Syria

Party / Affiliation: Formerly Hay-at Al-sharm (HTS); Current Revolutionary Council

PERSECUTION MEASURES

REPRISALS

Arbitrary killings and expulsions of Alawite, Druze, and Christian civilians in newly “liberated” regions, often justified as counter-Ba’athist operations.

DETENTION

Reactivation of regime prisons under new management, now filled with suspected loyalists and minority clerics accused of undercutting the new administration.

DISCRIMINATION

Marginalization of Christian, Druze, and Yazidi communities in governance councils and denial of property restitution.

ICC RECOMMENDATIONS

- Immediate, independent investigations into reported mass killings and reprisals; full access for international monitors to detention sites.
- Conditioned international recognition and aid on concrete benchmarks: dismantling of sectarian militias, judicial reform, and demonstrable protections for religious minorities.
- Support programs for displaced communities and targeted protections for Christians and vulnerable religious groups while a durable, rights-respecting security sector is built.
- Accountability mechanisms to enact justice for war crimes committed by both Assad and post-Assad actors.

SUMMARY

- Ahmed al-Sharaa, former commander of the HTS militant group, became Syria’s transitional president after the collapse of the Assad regime in late 2024.
- Once a hardline jihadist, al-Sharaa now presents himself as a national reformer seeking to restore stability and unity.
- His rule brings both hope of order and grave fear of renewed Islamist repression, particularly among Syria’s Christian, Alawite, and Druze minorities.
- Despite promises to close Assad-era prisons and protect all citizens, credible reports describe mass detentions and reprisal killings in minority regions.
- Analysts warn that without oversight, Syria’s transitional era risks becoming a new authoritarian chapter cloaked in revolutionary legitimacy.

TURKEY

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Diyanet: The Diyanet, or Directorate of Religious Affairs, is tasked with the promotion of Sunni orthodoxy. It receives billions of dollars to fund this mission and has become one of the Turkish government's largest and most powerful government bodies in recent years.² Meanwhile, Christians and minority religious communities are struggling for the most basic recognition and often face significant opposition from government forces. While the government control of Sunni Islam via the Diyanet is itself an area of concern, the enormous inequality of condition created by the Diyanet's activities makes an already-tense situation even worse.

Directorate of Immigration Management: The Directorate of Immigration Management has emerged as one of the most active enforcers of religious repression, especially for Christian missionaries. Immigration officials wield N-82 security codes to blacklist and deport Christian clergy under vague national security pretexts, effectively denying churches leadership.³ These codes, which are nearly impossible to appeal, have forced dozens of foreign religious workers to leave Turkey. In July 2025, authorities deported Iranian convert Mehran Shamloui, who had fled persecution, returning him to Iran where he faces a 10-year prison sentence.⁴

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is the architect of Turkey's modern day religious nationalism. His government prioritizes Sunni Islam through policies that expand the reach of the Diyanet, elevate mosque construction, and curtail religious pluralism. Under his leadership, symbolic moves like converting the Chora Church and the Hagia Sophia into mosques highlight the erasure of minority heritage.⁵ Erdoğan's rhetoric paints critics — including Alevis, Christians, and secular opponents — as threats to a unified national identity, while his consolidation of power over the judiciary ensures legal backing for discriminatory policies.

Erdoğan's populist appeal blends nationalism with religious conformity, presenting this mix as both traditional and a security necessity. The result is an environment where non-Sunni identities are stigmatized, alternative viewpoints suppressed, and minorities left with shrinking legal protections. Erdoğan's two-decade rule has entrenched this model, making his role central in sustaining persecution of religious minorities.



QUICK FACTS

Region: Middle East North Africa

Population: 84.12 million

Religious Demography:

- 99.8% Muslim
- 0.2% Other*

Language:

- Turkish
- Kurdish

**Independent research indicates that the proportion of Muslims in Turkey may be closer to 88%, with an additional 4% identifying as Alevi, 2% with other religions.*

“Turkey is continuing down the path of authoritarianism, using increased government control to fuel centuries-old ideas of pan-Turkic nationalist superiority over the region’s many ethnic and religious minorities.” —ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

NATIONALISM

Turkish nationalism harkens back to bygone centuries of Turkish influence in the region and predicates the full rights of citizenship on religious conformity rather than civic equality. A common theme of Turkish nationalism in the 21st century is the appeal to the glory days of the Ottoman Empire, which boasted significantly larger territory than modern-day Turkey.⁶ Turkish nationalists, led by Erdoğan, desire a return to Ottoman levels of control and hegemony, often at the cost of minority ethnic and religious identity today.

Erdoğan and the ruling AKP advance this vision through public speeches, cultural projects, and education policy. The conversion of historic Christian sites into mosques symbolizes the dominance of this ideology. By presenting Sunni Islam as a prerequisite for loyalty to the nation, Turkey marginalizes pluralistic identities and entrenches discrimination against communities that fall outside this narrow definition of “Turkishness.”

EXTREMISM

Extremist violence compounds Turkey’s repression. The January 2024 Islamic State attack on Istanbul’s Santa Maria Church demonstrated the ongoing risk of terror against religious minorities.⁷ While authorities condemned the assault, churches remain soft targets with minimal state protection. Fear generated by extremist groups deepens the marginalization already felt under government restrictions. For Christians in particular, the dual threat of radical violence and state hostility creates a precarious existence in which worship and assembly are both dangerous and politically fraught.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

Turkey’s criminal code bans “insults to religion,” with violations of this code carrying with it penalties of six months to one year in prison for disrupting public peace by offending a religious community. Although framed broadly, the law functions primarily to shield Islam and authorities rarely if ever pursue cases involving insults to minority faiths. Instead, it is used as a tool of intimidation against Christians.

Turkey also lacks a statute explicitly prohibiting conversion or proselytization, but authorities have pursued a sustained crackdown on Christian missionary activity. At the same time, bureaucratic hurdles make it extremely difficult for Muslims to change the religious designation on their national identification cards, restricting religious freedom in practice.

POLITICS

Political repression and religious discrimination are increasingly intertwined. Erdoğan’s government uses religion as a tool of political consolidation, aligning state institutions with Sunni orthodoxy. The government all but denies the existence of religious minorities, claiming that the country is 99% Muslim, despite more rigorous estimates which place that number at or below 88%.⁸ Still, Erdoğan’s government uses religious minorities as a convenient political trope, labeling some as terrorists and restricting the rights of others to garner public attention.

EDUCATION

Educational reforms in recent years have further embedded Sunni Islam into the school system. The Ministry of Education expanded compulsory courses in religion, emphasizing Sunni teachings while marginalizing other perspectives. This nationalist indoctrination starts in primary school and continues through secondary education, shaping national identity around religious conformity.⁹ By presenting Sunni orthodoxy as a civic duty, the education system erodes respect for pluralism and normalizes intolerance.¹⁰ Students from minority backgrounds face alienation, while their traditions are distorted or omitted entirely.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

Turkey continues to criminalize religious dissent and minority advocacy. Believers, lawyers, and writers who challenge Islamic orthodoxy or promote conversion risk arrest or deportation under broad national security or blasphemy laws. Detentions are often accompanied by travel bans and probationary measures that silence community leaders.

REFUGEES & IDP CAMPS

The July 2025 expulsion of Iranian convert Mehran Shamloui, despite clear risk of persecution in his home country, highlighted systemic failures to safeguard vulnerable refugees. Refugee camps often lack sufficient security for minorities, and reports indicate harassment by both officials and other asylum seekers. Turkey’s treatment of religious refugees underscores its use of asylum policy as another tool of exclusion.

ICC NEWSROOM

Christians Endure Uptick in Persecution in Turkey Sept. 5, 2025

In recent years, persecution against Christians in Turkey has intensified.

Following this trend, last year saw attacks on churches at both its start and end. In January, a man shot at Eskişehir Salvation Church, though no one was inside. At the end of 2024, a man near a Salvation Church association building in Istanbul fired rounds at the building from his car.

“We will not allow you to brainwash our Muslim youth!” the man shouted from his car. “Oh, infidels, you will be defeated and swept up into hell!”

Amid these incidents, Christian organizations, including International Christian Concern (ICC), recognized the emerging trend late last year. Then, earlier this year, Turkey jumped five spots to No. 45 on Open Door’s World Watch List, which ranks the hardest places to be a Christian.

Turkey’s Constitutional Court Supports Government’s Expulsion of 9 Foreign Christians June 14, 2024

Turkey’s highest court, the Constitutional Court, recently ruled that the government’s expulsion of nine foreign Christian leaders based on secret service reports does not violate their freedom of religion. Six of the court’s 13 judges dissented.

Although the nine believers had legally obtained residency permits, their perceived missionary activities prompted Turkey’s Directorate of Immigration Management to apply N-82 codes against the Christians. The codes designate foreigners as “risks to national security” and prevent them from obtaining prior authorization to enter Turkey.

The nine expelled Christians can now appeal to the European Court of Human Rights.

“Every human being has the natural right to freely practice their faith,” said McKenna Wendt, Advocacy Manager for International Christian Concern (ICC). “This includes the right to share one’s faith with their neighbor. The Turkish Constitutional Court’s decision to label sharing the gospel as a ‘threat’ to national security is wrong and in violation of international human rights law. We commend the bravery of the six dissenting judges and pray for a favorable outcome should the applicants appeal to the European Court of Human Rights.”

Anti-Christian Hate Crimes Double During 2-Year Period in Turkey Nov. 20, 2024

The number of anti-Christian hate crimes in Turkey more than doubled from 2021 to 2023, according to an International Christian Concern (ICC) analysis.

According to data from the Freedom of Belief Initiative (FOBI), a religious freedom watchdog group, hate crimes against Christ followers in Turkey jumped from 10 in 2021 to 22 in 2023.

Since 2020, Christians have experienced most of the religious hate crimes committed in Turkey, with 52 occurrences reported. The crimes include property damage, harassment, and violence. Additionally, the FOBI stated that the true number of hate crimes is likely higher than what has been reported due to victims’ fear of ostracization.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) reported several incidents of hate crimes against Christians. In October 2023, a man entered a church, recited an Islamic prayer, and slapped the pastor during a service. In May 2023, two elderly men were hospitalized after being “physically assaulted with sticks and stones” for their faith. OSCE also reported other incidents of violence and intimidation against Christians.

To read more persecution news from Turkey and other regions, visit www.persecution.org

CITATIONS

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- ⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-arrests-suspected-istanbul-church-attack-planner-linked-islamic-state-2024-09-14/>
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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Turkey
U.S. Department of State



USCIRF Annual Report 2025 - Turkey (p.66)
United States Commission on International Religious Freedom



Turkey: Challenges Facing Christians 2016-2020
International Christian Concern

ICC AT WORK

An already persecuted Christian community in southeast Turkey suffered a devastating earthquake near the Syrian border in 2023, displacing more than 50,000 people. ICC supplied emergency relief and necessities including blankets, tents, and clothing for families and maintains contact with networks in the region.

CONCLUSION

Turkey continues to reinforce its trajectory toward religious nationalism, embedding Sunni Islam at the heart of national identity and governance. State institutions — from the presidency and judiciary to the education system and immigration authorities — systematically marginalized religious minorities through laws, deportations, and indoctrination. The conversion of Christian heritage sites into mosques and the expansion of compulsory Sunni-centric curricula symbolize this narrowing vision of citizenship. For many minorities, discrimination is no longer episodic but structural, woven into the state's political and cultural fabric.

Non-state actors compound the problem. The Islamic State group's attack on Santa Maria Church in Istanbul underscored the deadly risks minorities face, even as government repression erodes avenues for redress. Refugees seeking sanctuary discovered instead that Turkey deports them back to persecution, as seen in the expulsion of Iranian Christian Mehran Shamloui. Together, these dynamics produce an environment where religious pluralism is under siege.

If left unchecked, Turkey risks abandoning its secular and democratic traditions in favor of a nationalist narrative of hatred and exclusion. The international community must respond with greater urgency — through diplomacy, targeted pressure, and support for civil society. Protecting religious minorities is not only a moral imperative but also essential to restoring Turkey's credibility as a rights-respecting state.

DESIGNATION

COUNTRY STATUS

SWL

CPC

SPECIAL WATCHLIST:
2023-2026

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1

LEVEL 2

LEVEL 3

LEVEL 4

EXERCISE INCREASED CAUTION to Turkey due to terrorism, armed conflict, and arbitrary detentions. Some areas have increased risk. (As of March 8, 2026)

BY THE NUMBERS

3

CHRISTIANS KILLED

Between July 1, 2024, and July 1, 2025

4

RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS
DAMAGED OR CLOSED

40

CASES OF PHYSICAL
AND MENTAL ABUSE

9

CHRISTIANS FORCED
TO LEAVE THE
COUNTRY

**THESE FIGURES
REPRESENT ONLY A
SMALL PORTION OF THE
LARGER PERSECUTION
PICTURE.**

International Christian Concern (ICC) partners with the International Institute for Religious Freedom to support its Violent Incidents Database.

RUSSIA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

State Security Forces: The Russian state security apparatus remains the central instrument of government control over religion. Human rights monitors note with concern that security forces are continuing to conflate independent religious expression with political dissidence. Raids, fines, prosecutions, and even the closure of disfavored Christian gatherings are seen all too often across Russia and include a wide swath of groups outside the state-sanctioned church. The government is suspicious of any religious activity that might be touched by foreign influence and has cracked down on missionary activity.¹ It also uses the language of national security to justify its repression of beliefs considered to be extreme, leading to crackdowns even on charitable work and social media posts.

Russian Orthodox Church (ROC): The Moscow Patriarchate of the ROC has become an increasingly active tool of state repression and a major beneficiary of government support. While this is consistent with longstanding trends, the war in Ukraine has increased these patterns and given the ROC newfound prominence in the constellation of supporting actors around President Putin.² Patriarch Kirill, the head of the ROC, has repeatedly given ecclesiastical cover to state actions that target churches and clergy who resist the government or the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Internally, the ROC exerts discipline on parishes and pressurizes clergy to conform. Dissenting priests risk dismissal, criminal exposure or administrative penalties. In occupied

Ukraine, ROC-aligned actors — and some UOC clergy cooperating with occupation authorities — have been implicated in property seizures, collaboration, and the marginalization of Ukrainian ecclesial autonomy. That merger of church authority and state policy in the ROC intensifies persecution of religious groups viewed as politically unreliable.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Vladimir Putin: Vladimir Putin is the architect of the legal and political environment that enables religious repression across Russia and in occupied Ukrainian territories. His administration has systematically broadened legal tools — from Yarovaya-era measures to wartime amendments and expanded extremism statutes — that security services wield to criminalize a wide array of peaceful religious activities, including private proselytism, public criticism, and faith-based dissent.

Putin has fused national identity and Orthodoxy in state rhetoric, elevating the ROC as an ideological partner and framing independent churches as sources of foreign influence or internal threat. Under Putin's rule, prosecutions, fines, administrative closures, and deportations of foreign missionaries have increased; clergy who publicly oppose the war or shelter dissent face harassment, arrest, or worse. The Kremlin's policy objective — consolidate domestic control and subsume Ukrainian institutions — makes religious conformity a security priority.

QUICK FACTS

Region: Eurasia

Population: 140.49 million

Religious Demography:

- 72% Russian Orthodox
- 18% None
- 7% Muslim
- 3% Other

Language:

- Russian



“State co-option of religion and growing authoritarianism leave little space for genuinely free religious practice in Russia.” —ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

NATIONALISM

Russkiy Mir, or “Russian World,” is a political ideological concept promoted by the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church, arguing that all people who share the Russian language, culture, or Orthodox faith belong to one “civilizational sphere” that should remain spiritually and politically unified under Moscow’s leadership. Originally used as a soft-power slogan in the 2000s to describe cultural outreach to the Russian diaspora, it evolved after 2014 into an expansionist doctrine. In state and church rhetoric, Russkiy Mir now justifies Russia’s actions in Ukraine, Belarus, and other post-Soviet states by portraying them as the reunification of a single Russian Orthodox civilization allegedly under threat from the West.

Patriarch Kirill and President Putin both invoke Russkiy Mir to fuse nationalism, religion, and geopolitics: loyalty to the Kremlin and the Moscow Patriarchate becomes a measure of spiritual and civic belonging.

EXTREMISM

Russia’s expansive extremism laws and related amendments are applied to criminalize everyday religious activity. Prosecutions for missions now reach sermons, social media statements, and small fellowship meetings. Since 2016 and through wartime amendments, authorities have prosecuted clergy and lay leaders under vaguely worded statutes that grant broad discretion to investigators.³ Monitoring groups report that these laws are a legal tool used to close meeting spaces, confiscate literature, and intimidate congregations.

POLITICS

Persecution is driven as much by political calculation as by theology. Religious conformity is equated with loyalty to the regime; churches that critique state policy, shelter dissidents, or voice moral objections to the war are treated as political opponents. New legal instruments and administrative practices sharpened since the invasion of Ukraine let authorities pursue religious actors under the guise of national security or anti-extremism.⁴ Political prosecutions target clergy and lay activists, while property and registration rules are used to limit independent religious structures. The result is a narrowing of public space for independent religious activity.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

Arrests and criminal sentences for clergy and lay leaders have been increasingly reported, especially for speech or ministry framed as extremist or as “public calls.” Monitoring organizations document cases of social-media posts, sermons, and private fellowship being used as evidence in criminal proceedings. Foreign missionaries face deportation; Russian citizens may face prolonged pretrial detention, heavy fines, or labor penalties.⁵

SURVEILLANCE

Surveillance has become pervasive across Russia, including through phone interceptions, online monitoring, and informant networks.⁶ Unfortunately, these efforts often target churches and faith communities. Authorities demand membership lists and monitor messaging apps and websites, using digital monitoring as grounds for extremism inquiries. This surveillance compels congregations to limit public activities and discourages open pastoral counseling. Technology and informant networks have become routine instruments of ecclesial control and repression.

DESIGNATION

COUNTRY STATUS

SWL

CPC

COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR CONCERN: 2023-2026

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1

LEVEL 2

LEVEL 3

LEVEL 4

DO NOT TRAVEL to Russia for any reason due to terrorism, unrest, wrongful detention and other risks.
(As of Dec. 29, 2025)

BY THE NUMBERS

167
CHRISTIANS KILLED
Between July 1, 2024, and July 1, 2025

37
RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS
DAMAGED OR CLOSED

130
CHRISTIANS
ARRESTED

61
FORMS OF MENTAL OR
PHYSICAL ABUSE

41
ATTACKS ON HOMES

THESE FIGURES REPRESENT ONLY A SMALL PORTION OF THE LARGER PERSECUTION PICTURE.

International Christian Concern (ICC) partners with the International Institute for Religious Freedom to support its Violent Incidents Database.

ICC NEWSROOM

Russia Continues Crackdown on Unregistered Baptist Churches Nov. 10, 2025

Russian courts banned three more Baptist churches in October for failing to register with the government, according to the religious freedom watchdog Forum 18.

These churches, located in the southern region of Krasnodar, are part of the Council of Churches Baptists, which has already seen seven other congregations banned.

“In Russia, the ‘witch hunt’ is continuing,” Russian attorney Anatoly Pchelintsev said. “I have a question for the deputies who seem so quick to pass prohibitive and punitive laws: What’s stopping them from providing clarity and certainty in legislation so that believers are not harassed?”

It is unclear why officials have specifically targeted congregations of the Council of Churches Baptists since 2024. However, it may relate to the numerous cases of “unlawful missionary activity” in the Krasnodar region.

When a church is banned by court order, it is prohibited from meeting not only at its usual location but anywhere within the city or district.

The reason these churches choose not to register lies in their foundational purpose. The Council of Churches Baptists was established during the Cold War to resist Soviet control over its congregations, unlike registered churches, which were strictly regulated by the state.

Although the Council continued its activities after the fall of the Soviet Union and now meets openly, they do so only in private homes or on private land.

Russian Court Bans ‘Extremist’ Bible Translation March 19, 2025

Earlier this month, the Moscow City Court banned a Bible translation by a popular Chinese Christian, labeling it as “extremist.”

It is now illegal to distribute the New Testament: The Recovery Translation, translated by Witness Lee, founder of the Local Church in Moscow. In the 1950s, Witness Lee led much of the Local Church’s expansion into Taiwan, the United States, and other nations.

Witness Lee had been sent and commissioned by Watchman Nee, the famous Chinese Christian leader who founded the Local Church in the 1920s and who was imprisoned in 1952 for life by the Chinese Communist Party for his Christian activities.

The Moscow court ruled that the Bible was un-canonical and unnecessarily exclusive over other Bible translations, especially those from the Russian Orthodox Church.

Pastor Sentenced to Labor Camp for Sermon Opposing Russia’s War in Ukraine Sept. 5, 2025

On Sept. 3, Nikolay Romanyuk, 63, was found guilty of making “Public calls to implement activities directed against the security of the Russian Federation,” according to Forum 18.

Despite the Russian pastor’s age and health conditions, the court sentenced him to four years in a prison labor camp.

“Yes, I gave a sermon in which I touched on military, albeit forced, murder,” Pastor Romanyuk said in a final statement before the court. “I do not retract what I said. I set forth my personal view and attitude toward the taking of a human life. This is my personal attitude as a clergyman. I do not retract my sermon.”

Pastor Romanyuk gave his now-criminal sermon a week after Russia partially mobilized its forces against Ukraine in September 2022 at the Holy Trinity Pentecostal Church in a suburb of Moscow.

20 Dead Following Attacks on Churches, Synagogues in Russia June 25, 2024

An unknown group believed to be Islamic extremists attacked several churches, synagogues, and a police traffic stop on Sunday evening in Dagestan, Russia. The attack resulted in the death of at least 15 police officers and four civilians, including a 66-year-old Orthodox priest.

The attack occurred during the Orthodox festival of Pentecost. Russian authorities stated that the various buildings were set on fire using Molotov cocktails.

This attack comes after the ISIS-K attack on a concert venue on March 22 in Moscow, which claimed the lives of 145 people.

Home to more than 30 unique ethnic groups, Dagestan is a predominantly Muslim community with a small but ancient Jewish population. Dagestan has a history of extremism, with Russian forces fighting an Islamist insurgency in the early 2000s.

To read more persecution news from Russia and other regions, visit www.persecution.org

CITATIONS

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- ² <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2025-06/2025%20Russia%20Country%20Update%20FINAL.pdf>
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LEGAL TAKE

By ICC Human Rights Counsel

Russia's constitution recognizes four "traditional" religions in its constitution: Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity. However, Russian law gives a "special role" specifically to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).

To protect this "special role" of Russian Orthodoxy, the government attempts to heavily regulate all non-Orthodox Christian denominations, especially Protestants. The government has placed restrictions on preachers and foreign ministries, tightly controls the importation of theological material, and criminally prosecutes ministers whose preaching offends the state.

The animosity toward non-ROC churches extends into the War in Ukraine, as Ukrainian Orthodox and Protestant churches have been specifically targeted by the Russian military. Churches have been forcibly closed, converted into bases of military operation, vandalized, or burned to the ground by Russian troops, and citizen clergy have been arrested and held incommunicado in Russia.

Far from being a friend of the church, Russia uses both its political and military resources to suppress any expression of Christianity that doesn't fall within the control of its preferred denomination.

CONCLUSION

Russia has developed a coherent, multi-layered system of religious repression combining law, church-state fusion, security tactics, and irregular violence. The legal architecture provides officials with discretionary tools to criminalize ordinary religious activity. The ROC's institutional alignment with Kremlin narratives amplifies pressure on non-aligned Christians and helps legitimize property seizures and leadership replacements in occupied territories.

Security services and regional implementers operationalize these laws through surveillance, prosecutions, and administrative closures, while nationalist militias and collaborators supply the coercive momentum on the ground.

The humanitarian and ecclesial consequences are stark: internment, deportation, court cases, impoverished congregations, and displacement that disproportionately affect minority and Protestant believers. International monitors have documented the interplay between legal instruments and violent occupation practices; their reporting shows that repression is both systemic and intentional.

Reversing these trends requires curbing the abuse of vaguely worded statutes, reaffirming registration and due-process protections, and insulating religious life from being a proxy for geopolitical aims. The global community should prioritize accountability for abuses and targeted support for faith communities under pressure.

FACES OF THE PERSECUTED

A Church Raid Mid-Hymn in Ukraine

In September 2022, Rev. Mykhailo Britsyn conducted a normal Sunday service at Church of Grace in Melitopol, Ukraine, when Russian soldiers broke in.

They interrogated worshippers and told Rev. Britsyn and his family to leave the city soon or face execution. The pastor, like other clergy, was considered a threat. Soldiers seized and converted the Church of Grace to the Russian "Ministry of Culture," painted it red with faces of Russian soldiers, and removed a large cross.

"I was conveyed to their military vehicle, and they searched all church buildings," Rev. Britsyn said in a media interview. "They searched my house. And they told us to leave in two days."

"I don't think that a lot of Americans know about Ukraine and all the more about Protestant [churches] in Ukraine. Part of my mission now is just to tell the truth, just to raise awareness of what happened in occupied territory."

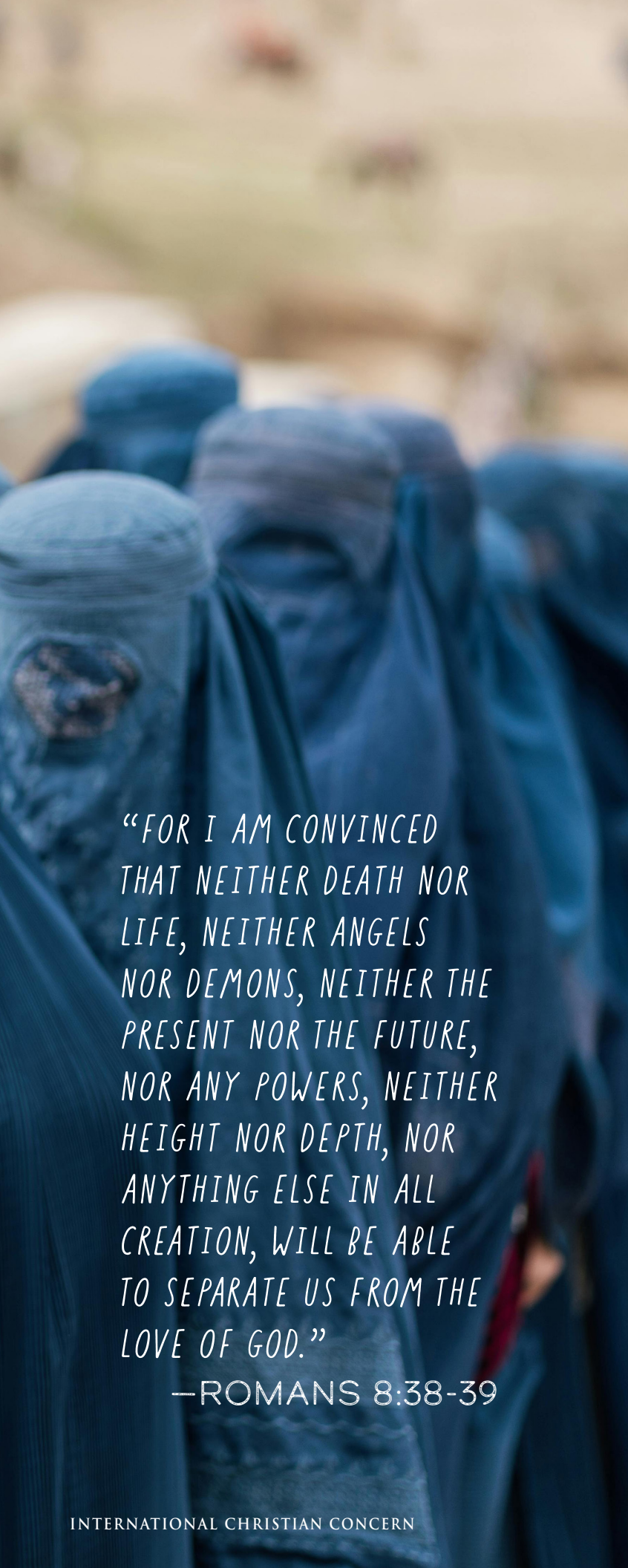
Pastors imprisoned, kidnapped, tortured, and killed in recent years:

- Priest Ihor Novosilsky endured arbitrary arrest, torture, and illegal imprisonment for 262 days.
- Pastor Andriy Klyauzer killed while distributing food to residents.
- Priest Rostyslav Dudarenko shot and killed by Russian soldiers at a checkpoint.
- Priest Stepan Podolchuk tortured and shot by Russian soldiers.
- The Church of St. Cyprian the Martyr suffered two separate attacks by a Russian drone and missile.
- The Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the UOC, attacked by Russia four times.

A photograph of several women wearing blue burqas in a rural setting. The woman in the foreground is the central focus, with her hands clasped in front of her. Other women in similar attire are visible in the background, slightly out of focus. The background shows a simple, light-colored building and some vegetation.

REGIONAL
OVERVIEW

ISSUES AND TRENDS IN
SOUTH ASIA



*“FOR I AM CONVINCED
THAT NEITHER DEATH NOR
LIFE, NEITHER ANGELS
NOR DEMONS, NEITHER THE
PRESENT NOR THE FUTURE,
NOR ANY POWERS, NEITHER
HEIGHT NOR DEPTH, NOR
ANYTHING ELSE IN ALL
CREATION, WILL BE ABLE
TO SEPARATE US FROM THE
LOVE OF GOD.”*

—ROMANS 8:38-39

Home to some of the world’s oldest religions, South Asia is now also home to some of its most virulent expressions of religious nationalism. Governments and nationalist movements alike are harnessing religion to consolidate power and marginalize minorities, creating an atmosphere of fear that threatens centuries of coexistence.

In India, Hindu nationalism continues to erode the secular foundations of the state. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its ideological affiliates have emboldened mobs to attack Christian pastors and Muslim communities with near impunity. Anti-conversion laws, now in effect in many states, criminalize basic expressions of faith and give local authorities broad license to harass Christians and low-caste believers.

In Pakistan, blasphemy laws remain a weapon of terror. False accusations routinely lead to mob violence and imprisonment. The Christian minority, already poor and politically marginalized, lives under constant threat. In Bangladesh, Islamic radicalism simmers beneath the surface, while in Sri Lanka, Buddhist nationalism has fueled hostility toward Christian converts and other religious minorities.

Economic hardship, political instability, and populist rhetoric have made religion an easy rallying cry for ruling parties seeking to consolidate control. Across the region, nationalist movements portray religious minorities as outsiders or agents of foreign influence. This fusion of politics and faith — part religious revival, part authoritarian project — has become one of the defining threats to religious freedom in South Asia.

Yet amid repression, faith continues to grow. Reports from underground networks in India and Pakistan indicate steady increases in conversions and discipleship. Believers gather in private homes, remote villages, and online fellowships. Their quiet courage affirms that the flame of faith cannot be extinguished, even in the crucible of persecution.

AFGHANISTAN

Editor's Note: While Afghanistan is considered at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, we have included it in this section.

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV):

Tasked with enforcing the Taliban's strict religious code, Afghanistan's morality police contribute to an environment of repression and intimidation, especially for women and those who do not ascribe to the Taliban's extremist interpretation of Islam.¹ Reports from across the country indicate that the MPVPV and its agents operate with little accountability and continuously violate the basic human rights of the Afghan people.

Taliban Intelligence Services: The Taliban's intelligence services have arbitrarily detained, tortured, and killed perceived opponents, including journalists, human rights defenders, and former government officials.² The regime has detained journalists and critics and imposed severe restrictions on the media. Afghanistan now faces one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, exacerbated by donor governments' aid cuts and the return of 1.9 million refugees expelled from Iran and Pakistan.³

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Haibatullah Akhundzada: The supreme leader of the Taliban, Akhundzada holds ultimate authority over the group's policies and actions. Under his leadership, the Taliban has implemented its extremist interpretations of Islamic law, leading to widespread human rights abuses, particularly against women and girls. His policies have resulted in the systematic repression of the rights of minorities. Akhundzada's leadership continues to shape the oppressive environment in Afghanistan and in July 2025 the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for him on charges of crimes against humanity and gender-based oppression.

Akhundzada has led the Taliban since 2016 and oversaw its victory over the United States and the U.S.-backed government in August 2021. He was previously an Islamic judge in the Taliban-run Sharia courts and has led the Taliban to impose sweeping restrictions on Christians and human rights across the country despite initial promises of reform. After two decades of freedom under a secular government, the people of Afghanistan are once again suffering under one of the most repressive leaders in the world.



QUICK FACTS

Region: South Asia

Population: 44.52 million

Religious Demography:

- 99.7% Muslim
- 0.3% Other*

Language:

- Dari
- Pashto
- Uzbek

“Back under Taliban control after a 20-year reprieve, Afghanistan is once again suffering under the totalitarian rule of religious extremists bent on stamping out every vestige of Western influence, Christianity and free religious practice.”

—ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

EXTREMISM

The Taliban enforces an extremist interpretation of Islamic Sharia law that leaves no place in society for religious minorities. The regime's policies have resulted in the systematic repression of Afghan Christians, who in many cases have no place to flee.

Radical Islam flows through every aspect of Taliban rule, affecting every citizen regardless of their personal religious convictions. From clothing to music to who one associates with, there is no area of life free from the Taliban's extremism. Religious minorities face a particularly harsh dichotomy between their own convictions and the dictates imposed upon them by the Taliban.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

According to experts, the majority of Afghan Christians are first-generation converts from Islam. This reality, a result of Christianity's relatively recent growth in the country, makes Afghan Christians especially vulnerable to the charge of apostasy, a crime under Sharia law.

Though a presumption that every Afghan is a Muslim means that second-generation Christians are also vulnerable to the charge of apostasy, converts to Christianity are especially exposed and can face increased danger from their community.

Converts to Christianity face constant threats, with even a rumor of their faith exposing them to violence, forced conversion back to Islam, and imprisonment according to Human Rights Watch.⁴

POLITICS

The Taliban takeover in 2021 led to the immediate dismantling of the democratic institutions so carefully constructed during 20 years of U.S.-backed secular rule. In the place of democracy, the Taliban has implemented a theocracy and rules with the harsh strictures of Sharia law. Political dissent is met with severe repression, including arbitrary detention and even death. The policies implemented by the regime systematically violate the basic human rights of the Afghan people, including their right to religious freedom and women's rights broadly.

EDUCATION

Despite early promises to continue providing equitable access to education, the Taliban quickly dismantled the national education system after taking over in 2021. It has been particularly harsh toward the right of women and girls to continue their education, barring them from education beyond the sixth grade.⁵ Despite the risk, some girls continue to study, often online with basic tools like WhatsApp and Google Meet.⁶

The Taliban is also working within the education system to convert schools into tools for its extremist propaganda. Reports indicate that the Taliban quickly began converting secular schools into madrasahs, or Islamic seminaries, for children after its 2021 coup.⁷

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

The Taliban's intelligence and law enforcement services are responsible for the arbitrary detention, torture, and extrajudicial killings of countless perceived opponents, including journalists, human rights defenders, former government officials, and those who do not submit to its strict Islamic moral code.

Though the Taliban has failed to implement a comprehensive national penal code or judicial system, its haphazard approach is no less oppressive. Local clerics are given a wide degree of latitude in applying the law, leading to inconsistent interpretations of Sharia code and widespread abuse among local officials.

WOMEN

Afghan women face severe religion-based restrictions on their rights and freedoms under the Taliban regime. Banned from secondary education and above, women are systematically pushed out of public spaces and forced to comply with an extreme interpretation of Islamic doctrine. According to a 2023 report by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, more than half of the 80 religious edicts promulgated by the Taliban since coming to power in 2021 restrict the rights of women and girls, leaving little room for Christian women to live in accordance with their faith.⁸

ICC NEWSROOM

USCIRF Claims Religious Freedom is Eradicated in Afghanistan, Calls for Action

Sept. 4, 2025

The U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) issued a press statement in August condemning the Taliban's continued efforts to "subjugate and target" religious minorities and calling for the U.S. to renew legal protections recently removed from Afghan refugees at high risk of religious persecution.

"If forced to return to Afghanistan," USCIRF Chair Vicky Hartzler said, "all Afghans, including religious minorities, are at severe risk of persecution."

According to Stephen Schneck, a USCIRF commissioner, Taliban rule has created an environment of extreme danger for the country's religious minority communities.

"The situation in Afghanistan remains dire for those who do not share the Taliban's strict interpretation of Islam," Schneck said. "We are deeply concerned that religious minority communities will be in grave danger, especially women and girls."

Afghan Christians are mostly first-generation converts from Islam, leaving them at risk of particularly severe punishment if discovered. Under the Taliban's interpretation of Sharia law, converts to Christianity are considered apostates deserving of the death penalty.

Taliban Blocks U.N. Human Rights Rapporteur from Entering Afghanistan

Aug. 23, 2024

The Taliban announced this week that it would not allow the U.N. special rapporteur for human rights, Richard Bennett, back into the country. Bennett was appointed to the position in 2022, the year after Afghanistan retook power in the country. He has visited several times since as part of his efforts to document human rights conditions, including those related to religious freedom.

As human rights conditions have deteriorated in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, Bennet has been outspoken in his criticism, calling the regime's actions against women and girls a crime against humanity.

Taliban officials described Bennett as spreading false propaganda about the country. U.N. reports on Afghanistan, including those led by Bennett, adhere to the highest standards of integrity and are rigorously sourced, according to a response issued by Bennett and quoted by Reuters.

According to a Foreign Policy publication, the Taliban's Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice claims to have detained more than 13,000 people for "immoral" acts since taking power in 2021. The Taliban enforces an extremist interpretation of Islamic Sharia law and does not tolerate dissent, politically or religiously, within the country.

USCIRF Condemns Taliban Rule in Afghanistan in New Report

Aug. 9, 2024

In a report published Wednesday, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) called religious freedom conditions in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan dire, documenting how the regime has continually worked to "repress and significantly stifle any action or behavior that does not conform with their strict interpretation of Islam."

USCIRF has recommended that the U.S. Department of State designate Afghanistan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) every year since 2022, but this recommendation has yet to be followed. The Department of State has never recognized the religious freedom concerns in Afghanistan by designating it as a CPC or Special Watchlist country, though it did designate the Taliban as an Entity of Particular Concern (EPC) three times from 1999 to 2001. The Taliban is not currently designated as an EPC.

Despite promises that it would rule with ideological moderation and restraint, the Taliban has implemented an extreme version of Sharia law in the country since seizing power in 2021. Enforcement of Sharia law includes, according to the recent USCIRF report, "public executions, lashings and floggings, stoning, beatings, and acts of public humiliation, such as forced head shaving."

To read more persecution news from Afghanistan and other regions, visit www.persecution.org

CITATIONS

¹ https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/moral_oversight_report_english_final.pdf

² <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/08/05/afghanistan-relentless-repression-4-years-into-taliban-rule>

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2025/07/afghanistan-returns-afghans-creating-multi-layered-human-rights-crisis>

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⁵ <https://apnews.com/article/un-afghanistan-women-taliban-medical-education-ban-4d33b8e97ad26d84bfd0bfd8d133b0c>

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⁷ <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-secular-schools-converted-madrasahs-education/31914672.html>

⁸ https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023%20Religious%20Freedom%20and%20Womens%20Rights%20in%20Afghanistan%20Issue%20Update_Final.pdf

REPORTS



**2023 Report on
International Religious
Freedom: Afghanistan**
U.S. Department of State



**USCIRF Annual Report 2025
Afghanistan (p.12)**
*United States Commission on
International Religious Freedom*

ICC AT WORK

ICC was heavily involved on the ground in Afghanistan before and after the Taliban takeover – including emergency aid, safeguarding and relocating Christians, and more. Recent developments and conditions have made it challenging for ICC and other nonprofits to do meaningful work in the country.

CONCLUSION

Afghanistan remains one of the most repressive environments in the world for religious freedom and human rights. The Taliban's fourth year in power has entrenched policies that systematically erase the rights of women and Christians, and suppress dissent.

Girls are banned from education beyond primary school, women are excluded from most employment, and public life is tightly controlled by morality police enforcing rigid dress and behavior codes. Religious minorities — particularly Christian converts from Islam—live under constant threat of harassment, imprisonment, or execution.

The humanitarian crisis deepened this year with the forced return of roughly 2 million Afghan refugees from Iran and Pakistan, many of whom now face homelessness, food insecurity, and targeted repression upon return. Political opposition is nonexistent, with dissent punished by arbitrary detention, torture, or extrajudicial killings.

Despite widespread documentation of these abuses by human rights organizations and the U.N., international pressure on the Taliban has been largely ineffective, hampered by geopolitical considerations and reduced humanitarian aid. Without coordinated, sustained intervention, the outlook for Afghanistan in 2026 remains bleak.

DESIGNATION

COUNTRY STATUS

SWL

CPC

**COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR
CONCERN: 2023-2026**

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1

LEVEL 2

LEVEL 3

LEVEL 4

DO NOT TRAVEL due to civil unrest, crime, terrorism, risk of wrongful detention, kidnapping, natural disasters, and limited health facilities. *(As of Feb. 20, 2026)*



LEGAL TAKE

By ICC Human Rights Counsel

Due to the reintroduction of Islamic Sharia law, virtually every stage of the legal system in Afghanistan is poised against Christians (and non-Sunni minorities in general). But the one law that has drawn some of the strongest international condemnation is the Law on the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, also known as the “morality law.”

The morality law directly targets religious freedom by strictly forbidding any religious practice or printing religious material that doesn't fall within Shia Islam while punishing those who don't observe Islamic practices. The law is so broadly written that it also punishes acts simply for being “non-Islamic,” which includes “befriending non-Muslims and assisting them.”

A common critique of the law is that it is often so heavily detailed that it becomes incomprehensible to the average person. And while that criticism is not without merit, laws lacking crucial tailoring and detail can become blank checks of injustice for unscrupulous officials.

INDIA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS): The RSS continues to drive Hindu nationalism across India and even internationally. While not a political party itself, the RSS serves as the guiding ideological force behind the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and mobilizes grassroots extremists throughout the country. In 2025, its influence over governance and public opinion only deepened, particularly in BJP-led states where the RSS and its affiliates organized protests and instigated mobs in the name of protecting Hinduism.

The RSS and its affiliates also organize Ghar Wapsi, reconversion drives or ceremonies aimed at forcing Christians and Muslims back to Hinduism. Converts to Christianity, often from low-caste backgrounds, are portrayed as traitors to their Indian identity and agents of a foreign conspiracy against Hinduism. Led by the RSS, mobs in many parts of India have attacked pastors, beaten Christians, and turned believers over to authorities on spurious charges.

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP): Although the BJP lost its outright parliamentary majority in the mid-2024 elections, it remains the dominant force in Indian politics — leading the federal government as the senior partner in the ruling National Democratic Alliance coalition and holding power in most state governments.

Functioning as the political wing of the RSS, the BJP continues to advance a Hindu nationalist agenda that restricts the religious freedom of minorities, including Christians. Central to this effort are state-level anti-conversion laws,

which, while framed as safeguards against coercion, are so vaguely worded that they criminalize ordinary acts of Christian faith such as singing worship songs, talking about heaven, or distributing food to the poor. While no Christian has been convicted under these laws, hundreds are harassed and jailed on the mere suspicion of wrongdoing.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Narendra Modi: Prime minister since 2014, Narendra Modi has overseen a sharp rise in Hindu nationalism and a corresponding decline in religious freedom across India. Though his party, the BJP, was forced into a coalition as a result of the 2024 elections, he is largely seen to have recovered from that political setback and has continued to notch political successes at both the state and federal levels.

Modi also promotes radical figures like Yogi Adityanath and has long championed nationalist causes like the Citizenship Amendment Act, which strips certain religious minorities of citizenship, and the controversial Ram temple in Ayodhya, which he had built on the grounds of an ancient mosque.

Early in a historic third term, Modi continues to downplay the rights of minorities and consistently fails to condemn anti-Christian violence. To the contrary, his rhetoric encourages hostility toward non-Hindus. His reelection campaign included frequent slurs against religious minorities, and his rule since has helped push them to the edges of society.



QUICK FACTS

Region: South Asia

Population: 1.45 billion

Religious Demography:

- 80% Hindu
- 14% Muslim
- 2% Christian
- 14% Other

Language:

- Majority Hindu

“India continues headlong into the mire of violent religious nationalism in which Christians and other religious minorities are relegated to second-class status or pushed out altogether.” —ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

EXTREMISM

Whether that persecution in the form of mob attacks or legal restrictions, religious persecution in India continues to be driven by Hindu nationalist extremism. Converts from Hinduism face particularly severe backlash from these extremists, with Christian leaders in the country telling ICC that Christian persecution often follows patterns first experienced by the Muslim community, which is larger and therefore tends to receive more attention.

Sadly, the RSS and other groups have experienced widespread success in mobilizing mobs and even entire communities against religious minorities. These mobs frequently attack Christian lay people, pastors, and places of worship in violent attempts to drive them out and purify the area from non-Hindu influence.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

Thirteen of India's 28 states have anti-conversion laws on the books, and more are working to follow suit. The northern state of Rajasthan passed an anti-conversion law early in 2025, requiring two months' notice to the government before a religious conversion and threatening criminal penalties for noncompliance. In July, authorities in the western state of Goa announced their support for such legislation, signaling growing anti-minority sentiment in India's smallest state.

Anti-conversion laws are based on post-colonial fears of outside influence and furthered by mass disinformation spread by Hindu nationalists who claim that Christians and Muslims are converting Hindus en masse as part of a plot to force large-scale demographic shifts and subvert the Indian way of life. While these rumors have no factual basis, they continue to influence legislation and everyday life for India's small Christian minority communities.

POLITICS

While Indian Christians experience significant persecution from mob violence, politics are at the core of the issues they face. Even the seemingly disorganized chaos of the mobs can be traced back to the political sphere, where polarization remains a key strategy.

Frequently elected by fostering fear of a minority takeover, BJP politicians and their political counterparts have created a permissive atmosphere for Hindu radicals desirous of maintaining Hindu purity. Some attackers even livestream their violent exploits on social media, gaining significant followings without any fear of interference from authorities.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

Despite decades of anti-conversion laws and thousands of trials, no Christian has been convicted of engaging in a forced conversion. Still, the myth remains that Christians are forcibly converting Hindus en masse, and new states continue to pass anti-conversion laws.

State governments use these laws to intimidate religious minorities, frequently arresting them and charging them for acts as simple as leading a church service or speaking about their faith. The consistent lack of convictions reveals the weakness of the charges, yet the accused still face significant hardship — spending weeks or months in custody and bearing the burden of costly legal defense.

DESIGNATION

COUNTRY STATUS

SWL

CPC

SPECIAL WATCHLIST:

2023-2026

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1

LEVEL 2

LEVEL 3

LEVEL 4

EXERCISE INCREASED CAUTION in India due to crime and terrorism. Some areas have increased risk. (As of June 16, 2025)

BY THE NUMBERS

Between July 1, 2024, and July 1, 2025

42

RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS
DAMAGED

276

CASES OF PHYSICAL/MENTAL
ABUSE

94

ATTACKS ON HOUSES
OR BUSINESSES

1,134

CHRISTIANS FORCED
TO FLEE THEIR HOMES

THESE FIGURES
REPRESENT ONLY A
SMALL PORTION OF THE
LARGER PERSECUTION
PICTURE.

International Christian Concern (ICC) partners with the International Institute for Religious Freedom to support its Violent Incidents Database.

ICC NEWSROOM

Legislator Puts Bounty on Evangelists in India July 7, 2025

A legislator belonging to the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party ruling Maharashtra state in India, put out a bounty on evangelists who allegedly visit villages for proselytization.

In a public speech, BJP Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) Gopichand Padalkar allegedly put a rate card for killings of different kinds of Christians, the highest amount being for pastors.

Padalkar allegedly made the speech after a 28-year-old woman, who was four months pregnant, died by suicide in Sangli district of Maharashtra because of an alleged demand for dowry from in-laws and pressure to practice Christianity.

The announcement of the cash reward sparked outrage among the Christian community.

Christian Husband, Wife First to Be Convicted Under Anti-Conversion Law Jan 27, 2025

A Christian evangelist couple in India was convicted on Jan. 22 for the mass conversion of Dalit community members under Uttar Pradesh's anti-conversion law. This is the first time that such a conviction has occurred in India. The convicted couple was deemed culpable under section 3/5 of the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Act.

The couple, Pastor Jose Pappachan and his wife Sheeja Pappachan, were found guilty of forced religious conversions and were sentenced to five years of imprisonment with a fine of Rs 25,000 each (about \$300). A special court in the Ambedkar Nagar district known for redressing offenses against socially disadvantaged castes like the Dalits convicted the Christian couple.

Dalits are socially, economically, and historically marginalized communities predominantly in India. Traditionally, the Dalits have easily embraced Christianity to escape the repressive caste system.

Hindu Nationalist Mob Attacks 20 Christian Families in Odisha June 30, 2025

A mob of hundreds of Hindu nationalists brutally attacked 20 Christian families on June 21 as they ate lunch together in the Malkangiri district of southern Odisha.

The mob, armed with sticks and sharp objects, brutally beat the members of the 20 families who live in three different villages. Eight people suffered severe injuries, including head trauma, and had to be hospitalized.

Since the villages are in a remote area, news of the attack emerged slowly. One of the victims managed to inform a pastor living near Malkangiri. The pastor sent a vehicle to transfer the injured to the district hospital.

Although a complaint regarding the attack has been filed with police, authorities have not taken action against the alleged perpetrators.

Indian State Plans to Demolish Hundreds of 'Unauthorized' Church Structures June 14, 2025

Within six months, the government of Maharashtra in India is planning to investigate and demolish hundreds of churches that it claims are unauthorized structures, most of which are in tribal regions.

The state is also planning to enact a stringent anti-conversion law to curb religious conversions carried out through inducement or coercion.

Maharashtra's Revenue Minister Chandrashekhar Bawankule announced the plans on June 9, as he addressed concerns raised by several members of the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly about alleged forced conversions in the state.

To read more persecution news from India and other regions, visit www.persecution.org

REPORTS



2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: India
U.S. Department of State



USCIRF Annual Report 2025 India (p.22)
United States Department on International Religious Freedom



Unchecked: The Rise of Hindu Nationalism
International Christian Concern

ICC AT WORK

- Necessities and aid packages to families evicted from their homes in Chhattisgarh. Working with partners to provide additional support.
- Small businesses for persecuted and struggling pastors.
- Eight Hope House school programs in rural Christian villages, hosted through local churches and attended by more than 250 children.
- Persecution Readiness Trainings to equip pastors on prevention and response to persecution (more than 1,000 pastors trained and served).

CONCLUSION

In 2025, India's Christian community continued to face rising Hindu nationalism, state-enabled discrimination, and mob violence. While the BJP lost its outright majority in the 2024 elections, its ideological and institutional influence remains strong, and the Modi government continues to ignore or rationalize attacks on churches and pastors.

"Religious freedom conditions in India continued to deteriorate," the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom noted in 2025, "as attacks and discrimination against religious minorities continued to rise." Fueled largely by nationalistic rhetoric from the BJP, including Prime Minister Modi, these attacks include "vigilante violence, targeted and arbitrary killings, and demolition of property and places of worship," according to USCIRF.

As the international community confronts religious persecution worldwide, it must not overlook India. While India is an important economic and geopolitical ally, its prominence should draw even greater attention to the widening gap between its human rights obligations and the reality on the ground.



LEGAL TAKE

By ICC Human Rights Counsel

Like the United States, India has a federal system where the country is broken up into several smaller states with a unifying central, government based in New Delhi. And at the national level, religious freedom is a legal right enshrined in Articles 25-28 of the Indian constitution. Where most persecuted Christians in India run afoul of the authorities is with state governments and regional laws, particularly the northern states.

Of 13 states that currently have anti-conversion laws on the books, most of them are dominated by the BJP, a political party intent on redefining India as a "Hindu nation." The Christian minority in these states are wildly outnumbered by political and religious actors intent on snuffing out their presence. However, the legal right of Indian Christians is enshrined as a national right, not a regional level. Due to India's federalist government system, authority on local-related issues is entrusted to less powerful regional governments, while national and international issues are managed by a central government. And one common aspect of federalist systems is that regional measures cannot directly contradict national law.

Indian states cannot take away the national right of religious freedom that belongs to the Christian minority in those states, despite how hard they may try. But when these rights are threatened, it is the responsibility of the central government in New Delhi to bring the regional governments back in line with its national laws and international obligations.

NARENDRA MODI

Fanning a growing flame of Hindu nationalism, Prime Minister Modi is willing to sacrifice the rights and freedoms of religious minorities to increase his power.

OVERVIEW

Modi played a key role in allowing riots in Gujarat, which left 2,000 Muslims dead. The chief minister of Gujarat at the time, Modi's public comments and wanton failure to stop the riots led to further religious violence against Gujarati Muslims. In 2005, the U.S. Department of State determined that his actions amounted to a severe violation of religious freedom and froze his.

Prime Minister Modi remains the only foreign official sanctioned under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act. While the sanctions were lifted when he became prime minister, the strength of the U.S. response to his actions in Gujarat shows his long history of religious repression.

Modi has since risen to become one of the most powerful figures in modern Indian history. His 2014 landslide victory promised development and anti-corruption reform, but the Modi era has instead been defined by a consolidation of power and an overt merging of religion and state.

At the heart of his political project lies Hindutva, the ideology that defines India primarily as a Hindu nation. Under Modi, the BJP has normalized language portraying Christians and Muslims as foreign or anti-national elements. State governments aligned with the BJP have passed a wave of anti-conversion laws, often used to harass pastors, close churches, and arrest converts even without evidence of coercion.

In fact, even after thousands of legal prosecutions, not a single Christian has been convicted of forcing a conversion on someone else. Still, prosecutors and local officials eager to win favor with Hindu radicals continue to arrest, detain, and force costly court cases on innocent Christians simply seeking to live their lives in peace and freedom.

The Modi government's control over media and other institutions has deepened with each election cycle. Independent journalists and NGOs are subject to tax raids, license cancellations, and intimidation. The Citizenship Amendment Act and the National Register of Citizens have institutionalized discrimination on religious lines, creating fear among minorities.

While Modi projects himself as a global statesman and tech-savvy modernizer, his domestic legacy is one of shrinking space for dissent and the weaponization of nationalism against India's own citizens.

Modi's India illustrates how persecution can grow within democratic institutions. Through a combination of populist nationalism, bureaucratic control, and silence in the face of violence, the government has cultivated an environment where non-Hindu communities live in fear. India's decline in religious freedom is not the result of civil war or chaos but of deliberate governance choices that recast religious diversity as disloyalty.



QUICK FACTS

Official Title: Prime Minister of the Republic of India

Assumed Office: May 2014

Born: 1950 in Gujarat, India

Party / Affiliation: Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

PERSECUTION MEASURES

LEGAL RESTRICTIONS

Anti-conversion and anti-blasphemy laws in this Hindu-dominated country disproportionately target Christians and Muslims, often leading to arbitrary arrests.

MOB VIOLENCE AND IMPUNITY

Attacks on churches, pastors, and Muslim businesses are frequent, rarely prosecuted, and often encouraged by political rhetoric or irresponsible legal tools like anti-conversion laws.

MARGINALIZATION

Citizenship and property laws have been restructured to privilege the majority identity while minority communities face continual new restrictions.

SURVEILLANCE AND CENSORSHIP

Media and political groups critical of the government face raids, shutdowns, or online harassment, while international NGOs have been expelled or restricted for foreign interference.

ICC RECOMMENDATIONS

- Accountability for violence, including impartial investigations and prosecutions for mob attacks.
- Protection of independent NGOs and media working to report on marginalized groups or provide them with aid.
- Increased aid and legal support for communities under pressure from government or mob forces.
- Global advocacy and support for efforts to document and raise awareness of persecution in India.
- Conditional regional cooperation that is based on measurable improvements in religious and civil freedoms.

SUMMARY

- Narendra Modi has risen to, and kept, power by making himself the figurehead of exclusionary Hindu nationalism in India.
- Under his leadership, Hinduism has been elevated as core to Indian identity while members of other faith communities have been devalued and pushed to the periphery.
- Indian states are increasingly passing anti-conversion laws. Based on false conspiracy theories about forced conversions, these laws stir up violence and create a legal framework for anti-minority sentiment.
- Religious NGOs are increasingly getting pushed out of the country or severely restricted in their operations.

NEPAL

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP): The RPP models itself in many ways on the Hindu nationalist BJP political party in India, which is leading the political and physical persecution of Christians and Muslims across the country. The RPP is a national Nepali political party with the express aim of reestablishing the country as a Hindu state. The RPP's calls for a return to the Hindu state are designed to push out religious minorities and restrict their freedoms under the law.

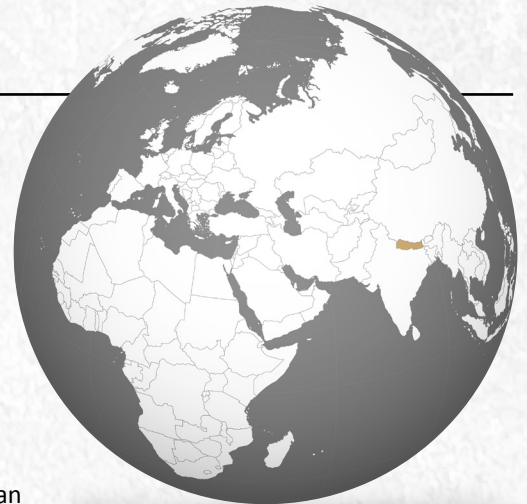
Vigilante Groups: Radical Hindu groups, often with ideological or material links to Hindutva movements in India, continue to target Christians and religious converts, especially in border and rural districts. These groups, which include Hindu Samrat Sena and Shiva Sena Nepal, organize Ghar Wapsi (or "return-home") campaigns pressuring minorities to convert to Hinduism, the premise being that the natural religious affiliation of a Nepali citizen is Hinduism and that any deviation from that must be due to deviant outside pressures.¹ The vigilantes also vandalize churches and publicly shame believers.² Their activity has intensified amid political instability, exploiting social unrest to intimidate minorities.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Ram Chandra Tiwari: Ram Chandra Tiwari, director general of Nepal's Department of Immigration, oversees an agency that has increasingly become an instrument of religious restriction. Under his leadership, the department has detained, interrogated, and deported foreigners accused of proselytization, even in cases where evidence was tenuous. In 2025, DOI officials in Kathmandu detained American citizen and missionary Daniel Courney, invoking anti-conversion laws to justify targeting religious activity.³

By amplifying vague statutes, the immigration department under Tiwari contributes to an atmosphere of fear among Christians and other minorities. Its discretionary power erodes religious freedom, reinforcing Nepal's reputation for suppressing peaceful evangelism and international Christian engagement.

Individuals like Durga Parsain, Dhrub Raj Luitel, and Abhishek Joshi are not only actively spreading hateful messages on social media; they are also organizing an anti-evangelism movement, training school children how to attack the Christians, and posting "No Conversion Village" signboards at the entrance of Hindu villages.



QUICK FACTS

Region: South Asia

Population: 31.12 million

Religious Demography:

- 81% Hindu
- 8% Buddhist
- 5% Muslim
- 3% Kirat
- 2% Christian
- 1% Other

Language:

- Nepali

“Creeping Hindu nationalism and discriminatory national laws leave little space for Christians and certain other disfavored religious minorities in Nepal.”

—ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

NATIONALISM

Religious nationalism is on the rise in Nepal, driven in large part by the RPP political party and malign influence from neighboring juggernaut India, which, according to reports cited by the U.S. government, is actively and financially supporting the spread of divisive religious nationalism to Nepal.⁴ While the idea that nationalist political parties in India might be funneling money to top Nepali politicians was met with outrage and protestations of innocence on the part of Nepal, the claim is widely understood to be a simple fact among Nepali civil society organizations, according to in-country interviews conducted by ICC.

EXTREMISM

Extremist Hindu militants represent the chief violent threat to Christians, Muslims, and other religious minorities in Nepal. These groups continue to exploit civil disorder to attack churches, damage property, and even smear black paint on pastors in a cultural sign of disrespect and shame. They also intimidate converts. ICC has worked on many cases in which converts to Christianity face severe ostracization from their communities.

Their tactics remain decentralized but effective in reinforcing fear, especially in rural and border zones. To date, such groups act mostly with impunity, occasionally colluding with local authorities.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

Clause 156 of Nepal's National Penal Code contains a provision outlawing acts that may "outrage the religious feelings of any caste, race, community or class."⁵ As with many blasphemy laws around the world, the issue with this law is not so much in an explicit limiting of some religious action, but in the vague language about religious speech that gives the government free rein to limit religious speech however it sees fit. In practice, this law could be used to outlaw any theological statement by a Christian.

Clause 158 regulates proselytization, with the Constitution declaring that "no person shall ... convert another person from one religion to another" or, in a dangerously vague prohibition, "jeopardize" another person's religion.⁶ As with the country's blasphemy law, these regulations on proselytization give the government dangerously broad discretion to attack the rights of minorities.⁷

POLITICS

The Hindu nationalist cause in Nepal has been more successful in the political arena, with topics such as restrictions on proselytization becoming popular. The topic has become a way to appeal to populist sentiments and a convenient bugbear for politicians needing to drum up electoral support. Power vacuums created by widespread political unrest in 2025 have permitted opportunistic targeting, and religious identity is an easy symbolic battleground. Political actors pushing for the restoration of the monarchy have linked faith and national loyalty, increasing pressure on Christians. Christian issues remain sidelined in broader debate, and religious freedom is not central in transitional roadmaps.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

In 2025, arrests over alleged evangelism have increased. Seventeen U.S. citizens were detained in Dharan over proselytization claims.⁸ In Kathmandu, foreign preachers have been arrested and face deportation.⁹ Some cases remain under investigation or delayed in courts, leaving individuals in legal limbo. These arrests serve both to intimidate and to legitimize anti-Christian enforcement under existing laws.

WOMEN

Christian women in Nepal carry intersectional risks: as converts in patriarchal Hindu families, they can face domestic violence, ostracism, or forced reconversion. Women leading house churches or Bible study groups are especially vulnerable to social coercion or being branded immoral. Because public roles by women in religious propagation are socially sensitive, female believers often must act discreetly to avoid detection and female business owners face a serious risk of local boycotts should they convert and be discovered by the local community.

FACES OF THE PERSECUTED

Pray for Persecuted Christian Brothers and Sisters in Nepal

“Serving the Lord here in Nepal is both a great blessing and a great challenge. Many of our brothers and sisters face persecution, rejection, and hardship because of their faith in Jesus. Yet even amid suffering, their love for Christ remains strong, and their testimonies shine brightly in their communities. It is deeply moving to see how God uses their faithfulness to draw others to him.

One of my dear friends, a pastor, was even imprisoned for two years simply for sharing the gospel and praying for people. Yet he continues to serve the Lord with joy and boldness. These faithful servants of God inspire me daily.

Please pray for these families, pastors, and believers throughout Nepal, that they may be strengthened, protected, and encouraged by the Holy Spirit. Pray that God will provide for their needs and give them courage to share the gospel with love and wisdom.

By God’s grace, I have been serving full-time as a missionary here in Nepal. The Lord has been so faithful and continues to do amazing things through His people here.

Sharing the gospel is very challenging. Radical Hindus often come after our Christian brothers and sisters to harm them. Many of them face false accusations and persecution. Yet, we cannot and will not stop sharing the Good News!

I, too, face many challenges — but by God’s grace, I will keep pressing on.

I can do all things through Jesus Christ who strengthens me — just as Paul said in Philippians 4:13.

—“Naomi,” a full-time missionary in Nepal

“Sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ in Nepal is still considered an issue and treated as a crime (religious conversion). Christians are primarily targeted. The majority of people are Hindu, and their number one target, when it comes to faith, is Christian believers. They discriminate against and ridicule Christians, labeling Christianity as a foreign religion and (Western) propaganda. They believe Christians here are bought with money and call the Christian faith “Gai khaane dharma” (cow-eating religion). In Hinduism, the cow is worshipped as a god. Christians can face persecution if they share the gospel or preach (naming Jesus Christ) on social media. Despite all this, the Christian community in Nepal is ever-growing. We see many young believers coming to God and working for the expansion of the Kingdom.”

—“Kabir,” a believer in Nepal.

UNDERGROUND CHURCH

States throughout Nepal do not recognize churches, barring churches from having a legal standing in the country. ICC has advocated on behalf of these churches since the new constitution was adopted in 2015. The church can use its religious rights, according to constitutional articles 26.1 and 26.2.



LEGAL TAKE

By ICC Human Rights Counsel

As of the writing of this chapter, Nepal is still in the aftermath of a youth revolution that toppled the political establishment virtually overnight. Many of the corrupt actors and institutions responsible for injustices toward the Nepalese people are now caught in a state of flux.

Under international law, when a nation’s government collapses, that nation is still bound to treaties it has ratified. Nepal is currently a state party to several human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and that treaty’s Article 18, the “international religious freedom” article.

While the world is watching to see how Nepal will remake itself in the months ahead, the new government will remain legally bound to protect the rights of its Christian population, something the old government failed to do. Prayer, political advocacy, and the faithfulness of the Nepalese church are needed to see these legal rights finally become a tangible reality as the new government of Nepal takes shape.

ICC AT WORK

In Partnership with Transform Foundation Nepal, ICC runs the advocacy training workshops and conferences for pastors and leaders that provide interfaith dialogue and interactions with parliamentarians and municipal representatives.

CONCLUSION

In 2025, the environment for religious minorities in Nepal grew more volatile due to a convergence of political crisis, rising religious nationalism, and aggressive use of ambiguous legal instruments. Gen Z–driven anti-corruption protests — sparked by a government social media ban and deep frustrations over elite privilege — culminated in the destruction of state symbols, the resignation of Prime Minister Oli, and the appointment of an interim government.

During this turbulence, Christians and converts risked being painted as instigators or cultural subversives. Hindu nationalist actors, emboldened by regressive ideology, used the disruption to escalate pressure on minority believers.

Legal structures built around anti-conversion and proselytism provide the state with powerful tools to penalize even nonviolent religious expression. In 2025, arrests of foreigners accused of evangelism — and the detention of U.S. citizens — highlight how those laws are being actively enforced.

Chapter 19 of the Muluki Ain, or general code of Nepal, states that “no one shall propagate any religion in such manner as to undermine the religion of other nor shall cause other to convert his or her religion.” Religious minorities are arrested and charged under this law, which goes beyond neighboring India’s bans on forcibly converting another to criminalizing participation in the act of conversion in any way. In Nepal, proselytization carries with it the threat of up to six years in prison and subsequent deportation in the case of foreigners.

The U.S. Department of State highlighted its concerns with Nepal’s anti-conversion and anti-proselytization laws in a report. “Multiple religious groups in the country,” the report stated, “[continue] to reiterate that the constitutional and criminal code provisions governing religious conversion and proselytism [are] vague and contradictory and [open] the door for prosecution for actions carried out in the normal course of practicing one’s religion.”¹⁰

Meanwhile, local vigilante groups and political actors pressing for a Hindu monarchy or state fuel societal hostility toward Christians. The breakdown of central authority amplifies these risks, enabling impunity.

Transitional leadership under Sushila Karki offers a limited window of possibility. Whether she will recalibrate Nepal’s approach to religious freedom is uncertain. For now, believers live in heightened insecurity: surveilled, vulnerable, and vulnerable to being scapegoated in a nation wrestling with its identity. The 2025 protests may thus prove pivotal — either in retrenching Nepal’s drift toward religious majoritarianism, or in opening space for genuine pluralism under renewed institutions.

DESIGNATION

COUNTRY STATUS

SWL

CPC

N/A

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1

LEVEL 2

LEVEL 3

LEVEL 4

EXERCISE INCREASED CAUTION to Nepal due civil unrest. (As of March 31, 2026)

BY THE NUMBERS

Between July 1, 2024, and July 1, 2025

18

CHRISTIANS ARRESTED

7

CHRISTIANS FORCED
TO FLEE THE COUNTRY

THESE FIGURES
REPRESENT ONLY A
SMALL PORTION OF THE
LARGER PERSECUTION
PICTURE.

International Christian Concern (ICC) partners with the International Institute for Religious Freedom to support its Violent Incidents Database.

PAKISTAN

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

State Security Forces: Pakistan's security forces and intelligence agencies continue to operate with broad impunity in matters of religious persecution. They often fail to intervene when mobs attack alleged blasphemers and sometimes are complicit in strong-arm tactics. In a positive development in 2025, the Islamabad High Court ordered the formation of a commission into the misuse of blasphemy laws, implicitly acknowledging state responsibility for this aspect of persecution in Pakistan.¹ State actors also enforce anti-Ahmadi and blasphemy statutes, prosecuting offenders under discriminatory laws designed to criminalize unpopular religious beliefs and sustaining structural denial of religious freedom.

Brick Kiln Industry: Across Pakistan, thousands of brick kilns churn out untold millions of bricks every year, each formed individually through the backbreaking labor of bonded workers forced into de facto generational slavery. While Christians make up less than 2% of the population, they make up 50% to 80% of the slaves in these factories, according to witness testimony provided to ICC through interviews.

In a typical pattern, a family will take out a debt of a few hundred dollars to pay for some type of emergency, such as a medical procedure. Unable to pay the debt back, the entire family will be forced to make bricks. Pakistani law, however, allows the debt to be reset when transferred to another factory owner, forcing generation after generation into slavery to pay for a minor debt and trapping these families in cycles of poverty, abuse, and neglect.

Terrorist Organizations: Militant groups such as Islamic State–Khorasan Province (ISKP) and regional insurgents exacerbate instability and contribute to persecution

indirectly. Insurgent attacks like the Mastung bus bombing in Balochistan in April 2025 intensify insecurity for all civilians, but the extremist ideological underpinnings behind ISKP attacks present a particular threat to religious minorities.

Local vigilante actors, often inspired or supported by radical Islamist ideology, remain a principal threat to religious minorities. Forced conversions, mob assaults, and weaponized false blasphemy claims continued to rise in 2025 — particularly targeting Christian and Hindu communities.² These actors exploit weak accountability and social acceptance of vigilante violence to settle disputes or extort property.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Saad Hussain Rizvi: Saad Hussain Rizvi serves as the current leader of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). Under his leadership, the party has entrenched itself as one of Pakistan's most influential Islamist movements, wielding street power through mass protests and violent demonstrations. Rizvi maintains a hardline stance on blasphemy laws, mobilizing supporters to pressure the state into enforcing the harshest penalties, including capital punishment.³

In 2025, TLP activists under his guidance were linked to protests that escalated into violence, intensifying fears among minority communities. Their capacity to shut down cities or provoke unrest ensures that their influence carries coercive weight.⁴ Rizvi's ability to rally thousands on short notice underscores his influence, while his political maneuvering ensures blasphemy remains a toxic but untouchable issue in Pakistani politics. His leadership reinforces a climate of intolerance where religious minorities and dissenters remain vulnerable to both mob violence and legislative entrenchment of discriminatory laws.



QUICK FACTS

Region: South Asia

Population: 252.36 million

Religious Demography:

- 97% Muslim
- 3% Other (Hindu, Christian, Sikh)

Language:

- Urdu
- Punjabi
- Pashto

“Driven by societal extremism, religious persecution in Pakistan infects every corner of society and relentlessly drives the country’s small Christian population to the fringes.”

—ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

NATIONALISM

Pakistani nationalism remains closely tied to Sunni-Islamic identity, effectively excluding non-Muslims and heterodox Muslims from the national identity. This conflation of religious and political identity fuels discrimination at every level, reinforcing the idea that Christians, Hindus, and Ahmadis are outsiders. Nationalist rhetoric portrays minority faiths as threats to cohesion, painting them as either agents of foreign powers or internal destabilizers. This ethno-religious nationalism creates fertile ground for scapegoating and mob violence, discourages interfaith solidarity, and ensures minorities remain politically marginalized. The resulting exclusion is not merely cultural but directly shapes laws, policing, and access to resources and jobs for non-Muslim citizens.

EXTREMISM

Extremist ideology continues to dominate Pakistan's religious landscape, with militant groups, radical clerics, and grassroots networks reinforcing persecution. Groups such as ISKP and TLP maintain a strong presence, and in 2025, their campaigns included suicide bombings and street protests that further inflamed sectarian tensions. Local vigilante groups, often animated by extremist preaching, readily mobilize against minority communities accused of blasphemy. Extremism thrives because state authorities selectively tolerate it, using it as leverage against political rivals or insurgent movements. This culture of impunity allows violence to spill into daily life, making extremists an enduring and deeply embedded driver of religious persecution.

POLITICS

Religion remains a central tool of political manipulation in Pakistan, with parties and leaders exploiting faith to consolidate power or suppress dissent. In 2025, the government intensified its crackdown on civil society and free expression, often using religious rhetoric to justify restrictions. Hardline Islamist groups like TLP leverage public demonstrations to pressure politicians into maintaining discriminatory policies. Politicians rarely challenge these groups directly, fearing backlash. Instead, they amplify religious identity in statecraft, embedding sectarian language into governance. This entanglement of politics and religion ensures discriminatory laws remain in force, while reforms are politically toxic, leaving minorities trapped in systemic repression.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

Arrests under blasphemy and anti-Ahmadi laws remain a defining feature of persecution, with cases often dragging on for years. Prison conditions for religious minorities are harsh, with reports of mistreatment and denial of adequate legal counsel. These imprisonments not only punish individuals but also terrorize entire communities, reminding them of their vulnerability. Judicial delays and discriminatory policing ensure little hope of justice.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

Pakistan's blasphemy laws pose a severe threat to the country's religious minorities. As with other blasphemy laws around the world, Pakistan's laws criminalize minority religious expression and provide authorities — and mobs, in the case of Pakistan — with nearly unlimited purview to attack disfavored religious groups for their faith. According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Pakistan's prohibitions on blasphemy are second only to Iran's in terms of how severely they violate the principles of international law.⁵ Despite years of international advocacy to overturn or soften these laws, Pakistan has only doubled down on the law, with legislation to increase punishments for blasphemy passing handily in the legislature in 2023.

EDUCATION

Pakistani society is highly stratified, with those at the bottom of society given little opportunity to advance. Pakistan's education system continues to reinforce exclusionary religious narratives, marginalizing minorities from an early age. School curricula often glorify Islamic identity while presenting non-Muslim histories as foreign or peripheral. Minority-run schools, which provide safe spaces, remain underfunded and targeted with restrictive oversight. As a result, generations of Christian families find themselves stuck in poverty, unable to obtain well-paying jobs for themselves or their children because they cannot access an education.

WOMEN

Women from minority communities bear the heaviest burden of religious persecution in Pakistan. They face disproportionate risks of abduction, forced conversion, and coerced marriage. In 2025, several cases highlighted the vulnerability of young Christian girls, including one 16-year-old who was abducted, forcibly converted, and married under fraudulent documentation. Courts occasionally intervene, as in the Elishba Adnan case, but most victims receive no justice, with perpetrators shielded by powerful networks.⁶ Sexual violence is also used as a coercive tool against minority women, compounding their marginalization. These practices not only devastate families but also perpetuate generational trauma and erode community resilience.

ECONOMIC MARGINALIZATION

Economic marginalization remains a significant but underappreciated driver of persecution. Many minority families live on insecure land or work in exploitative labor sectors, leaving them vulnerable to extortion and dispossession. Job postings for menial and dangerous work, such as diving in the sewers to clear blockages without any protective equipment, are often reserved exclusively for Christians. In other cases, generational slavery reduces the economic prospects for Christians to near zero. This economic weaponization intertwines persecution with structural poverty, ensuring minorities are trapped in cycles of dependence. Poverty and vulnerability thus remain central mechanisms sustaining religious oppression in Pakistan.

ICC NEWSROOM

Priest Rescues Christian Slaves in Pakistan

Nov. 21, 2025

Three Christian families in Pakistan have been freed from modern-day slavery, thanks to one Argentine missionary priest and a young layman who paid for their release.

Father Rico, a priest with the Order of St. Elias in Argentina, and a layperson named Diego traveled to Pakistan “with the sole purpose of freeing Christian slaves.” They have freed 110 Christians so far this year. Last year, they freed 200 people.

Father Rico calls this initiative PaX, meaning both “peace” and “Pakistan Christendom.” His mission is to rescue Christians living in bondage.

“Thanks to our supporters and their prayers, we were able to rescue 11 people — three families — from servitude,” the priest told Catholic News Agency (CNA). “These people were born into slavery. They had never known freedom. They were not allowed to attend Christian services nor receive sacraments. On the very day of being released from bondage, I was able to give them the sacraments, including baptism. It was a day of dual liberation!”

Pakistani Pastor Dies Days After Acquittal in Blasphemy Case

Oct. 15, 2025

After spending 13 years behind bars for a crime he had always denied, Pastor Zafar Bhatti finally walked free, only to die three days later. His death has cast a harsh light on Pakistan’s blasphemy laws and the grim conditions of its prisons.

Bhatti, 62, the founder of Jesus World Mission Church in Rawalpindi, died of cardiac arrest on Oct. 5 at his home in Punjab province. He had been released on Oct. 2 after the Lahore High Court’s Rawalpindi bench overturned his blasphemy conviction.

The pastor, who had no children, leaves behind his wife, who became bedridden during his long imprisonment.

“Despite all his suffering, he never gave up on seeking justice,” his lawyer said, describing Bhatti as a victim of systemic neglect. He added that the pastor’s wrongful imprisonment has left little hope for any compensation or redress.

Pakistani Teen Acquitted of Blasphemy Charges

July 10, 2025

On Tuesday, July 8, two Christian teens were exonerated after a minor dispute led to a false blasphemy charge, according to a report by Christian Daily International. Adil Babar, 20, and Simon Nadeem, 16, were just teenagers when they were charged in 2023 under Section 295 of Pakistan’s blasphemy laws for blaspheming Muhammad. According to reports, the two had been engaged in playful banter outside their homes until a neighbor started beating them. The neighbor accused the boys of calling a puppy “Muhammad Ali,” which is considered blasphemy in Pakistan and punishable by death. Witnesses say there was no puppy outside and that the neighbor was making claims of blasphemy to punish the boys. The trial for Babar and Nadeem lasted almost two years.

Pakistan Forcibly Converts Christians to Islam

Aug. 30, 2025

In May 2025, a 16-year-old Christian Pakistani girl was abducted from her home and married to a 28-year-old Muslim, Muhammad Asim.

Because it is unlawful for a Muslim to marry outside of the religion, Asim forced the girl to convert to Islam.

The girl told Christian Daily International, “He coerced me into putting my thumb impressions on some blank papers, which he then used to fabricate my false conversion to Islam and marriage to him.”

During the three months of their marriage, the girl was sexually assaulted, physically and psychologically abused, drugged, and forced into prostitution, which left her with serious health complications. In August, she was rescued and received intensive psychological and physical care.

This crime is not unusual in Pakistan. Every year, 1,000 girls from religious minorities, especially Hindus and Christians, are kidnapped, forcibly converted to Islam, and married to their abductors. As was the case with the 16-year-old girl, forced conversions and marriages usually mask other crimes, such as sex slavery.

To read more persecution news from Pakistan and other regions, visit www.persecution.org

CITATIONS

¹ <https://persecution.org/2025/07/21/court-orders-investigation-into-growing-misuse-of-pakistans-blasphemy-laws/>

² <https://persecution.org/2025/04/07/pakistans-persecution-of-christians-hits-alarming-new-heights/>

³ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1807800>

⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/19/pakistan-releases-tlp-chief-saad-rizvi>

⁵ <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Blasphemy%20Laws%20Report.pdf>

⁶ <https://persecution.org/2025/07/28/pakistan-court-denies-muslim-man-custody-of-christian-girl/>



LEGAL TAKE

By ICC Human Rights Counsel

Few laws are as fundamentally opposed to the concept of religious freedom as blasphemy laws. And though they are inherently religious in nature, these laws are best understood in the context of free speech.

Using Pakistan's statute as an example, Ch. XV, Article 295-A of its penal code forbids, "deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs." The law here makes the "outrage[d]... feelings" of a specific group the actionable harm suffered by the perceived offensive conduct. It is not any specific religious practice that is targeted; it is the mere expression of thoughts or beliefs being criminalized.

ICC AT WORK

- We work with a partner to provide aid to persecuted families and individuals
- We provide vocational programs for Christians, with a long-term goal to integrate freed brick kiln families.
- ICC supports an incubator for Christian entrepreneurs to develop their ideas, receive mentorship, and partner with local and government organizations.
- Our Generation Transformation program provides scholarships for deserving Christian students who otherwise wouldn't have the means.

CONCLUSION

Pakistan's trajectory for religious freedom and minority rights shows little improvement. State mechanisms remain complicit — through inaction, selective enforcement, or direct use of coercion — in sustaining persecution. Islamist vigilantes exploit societal intolerance and legal vacuums, weaponizing blasphemy and coercive conversion to intimidate, displace, or eliminate minority voices. Militant actors compound the climate of insecurity, expanding the domain of violence under which vulnerable communities must survive.

Although the Islamabad High Court ordered formation of a commission to probe misuse of blasphemy laws — a judicial acknowledgment of structural abuse — such measures risk being symbolic unless backed by enforcement, accountability, and legislative reform.

Meanwhile, minority women remain disproportionately at risk, and forced conversions continue largely unchecked. Economic precarity and land disputes provide further channels for persecution.

Without bold political will, repeal or revision of discriminatory laws, substantial protection mechanisms, and accountability for both state and non-state actors, religious minorities in Pakistan will remain in deep peril. International partners and local civil society must press for these reforms: court directives must translate into action; perpetrators must be held to account; and state institutions must shift from enablers of persecution into guarantors of protection.

DESIGNATION COUNTRY STATUS

SWL

CPC

COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR
CONCERN: 2023-2026

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1

LEVEL 2

LEVEL 3

LEVEL 4

RECONSIDER TRAVEL to Pakistan due to armed conflict, terrorism, crime, and kidnapping. (As of March 5, 2026)

BY THE NUMBERS

Between July 1, 2024, and July 1, 2025

14

CHRISTIANS KILLED

9

CHRISTIANS ARRESTED

6

CHRISTIANS ABDUCTED

6

CHRISTIANS SEXUALLY
ASSAULTED

7

CHRISTIANS FORCIBLY
MARRIED

204

CHRISTIANS FORCED TO
LEAVE THEIR HOMES

International Christian Concern (ICC) partners with the International Institute for Religious Freedom to support its Violent Incidents Database. These figures represent only a small portion of the larger persecution picture.

REGIONAL
OVERVIEW

ISSUES AND TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA





*“DO NOT BE AFRAID OF
WHAT YOU ARE ABOUT TO
SUFFER...BE FAITHFUL,
EVEN TO THE POINT
OF DEATH, AND I WILL
GIVE YOU LIFE AS YOUR
VICTOR’S CROWN.”*

—REVELATION 2:10

Southeast and East Asia remain a study in contrasts, boasting constitutional guarantees of religious freedom while maintaining some of the world’s most sophisticated systems of religious control. The region’s complex interplay of communism, aggressive Islamization, nationalism, and modern surveillance has created a climate where belief in Christ itself is subject to multiple restrictions.

In China, the government continues its campaign to Sinicize religion, subordinating every faith to Communist Party ideology. Churches that refuse registration are shuttered, their pastors are detained, and they are put under surveillance that extends even into online prayer meetings. Many pastors in China are arrested and imprisoned on false accusations of fraud and “xie jiao,” or “cultish teachings.” The Chinese model has influenced neighbors such as Vietnam, where new legislation tries to force all religious activity under state management, and Laos, where Christians risk imprisonment and physical attacks for unregistered gatherings.

Meanwhile, Myanmar remains a humanitarian catastrophe. The military junta, driven by Burman-Buddhist nationalism, has waged a campaign of ethnic cleansing against Christian and Muslim minorities. Entire villages have been bombed, and church leaders have been targeted for assisting displaced families.

Even in democratic nations such as Indonesia and Malaysia, extremist Islamic pressures have deepened. Churches face bureaucratic obstacles to construction, and social hostility against Christian converts is rising. In these nations, nationalism is cloaked in religious identity, casting minorities as unpatriotic or dangerous.

Technology has become both a tool and a weapon. Artificial intelligence and facial-recognition systems, pioneered in China, are spreading across the region, enabling new forms of digital persecution. Yet online networks also empower believers to share Scripture and support across borders.

The church in Southeast and East Asia remains under immense pressure — but it is alive and growing. From the underground networks in China to the coastal congregations of Indonesia, faith persists. The growing number of believers, even under surveillance and suppression, stands as one of the great miracles of modern Christianity.

CHINA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Chinese Communist Party (CCP): The main driving force behind religious persecution in China is a communist-centered national identity that leaves no room for loyalties — such as to God — outside of the state. Free religious practice is anathema because it presents the people with a system of values and beliefs that conflict with the absolute fealty demanded by the state.

While the CCP does permit a small handful of state-run religious institutions to exist, they are carefully controlled entities and exist solely to further government propaganda.¹ Independent religious institutions, like those in the Christian house church movement, are constantly harassed, and their leaders are subject to threats, imprisonment, forced disappearances, and even death.

National Religious Affairs Administration (NRAA): Tasked with implementing the CCP's vision of religion as a force subservient to the interests of communist nationalism, the NRAA is the government body responsible for regulating religion at both the national and the local level.²

In particular, the NRAA is part of China's Sinicization campaign, in which it forces religious groups to align with socialist values and CCP ideology. Churches are required to promote CCP narratives, clergy must pledge loyalty to the state

over their faith traditions, religious gatherings outside state-approved venues are frequently shut down, and independent Christians risk arrest under the Sinicization campaign — all part of an effort to ensure religion is subordinated to CCP control.³

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Xi Jinping: Despite an understated early career in underperforming provinces away from Beijing, Xi Jinping quickly consolidated power in himself after being appointed to the powerful nine-member Politburo in 2007. He was chosen for the presidency in 2013, just one year after seizing control of the CCP as its general secretary. In the 12 years since, Xi has continued to consolidate power in himself and currently enjoys complete political power, ruling as a totalitarian dictator and developing a cult of personality around himself that shows no sign of weakening.

Xi's desire for power is not limited to the political sphere and instead includes every corner of culture and society. Religious institutions have been systematically attacked, permitted to operate only insofar as they promote "Xi Jinping Thought," an element of the broader Sinicization campaign and evidence of how Xi's ambitions place him on equal or even superior position to the Communist Party itself.⁴

QUICK FACTS

Region: East Asia

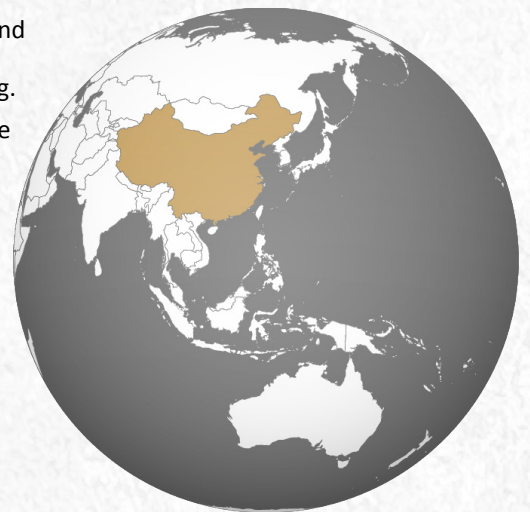
Population: 1.42 billion

Religious Demography:

- 52% Atheist or Unaffiliated
- 22% Folk Religion
- 18% Buddhism
- 5% Christianity
- 2% Islam
- 1% Other

Language:

- Mandarin
- Cantonese



“Anti-religious nationalism and a cult of personality around Chinese Communist Party leader Xi Jinping fuel China’s intense persecution of religion.” —ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

NATIONALISM

The persecution of religious minorities in China is driven by extreme government-sponsored anti-religious nationalism based on communist ideals and a vision of the country in which every institution must serve the interests of the CCP and its supreme leader. Minorities — whether ethnic or religious — threaten this nationalist vision by providing citizens with an identity outside of the state. Independent religious expression of any kind is labeled extremism, allowing authorities to normalize repression and erase ethnoreligious distinctiveness. A similar argument is applied to house churches, where gatherings outside state control are portrayed as security threats and treated like criminal enterprises.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

China regulates religious conversion through the wide-reaching 2017 Religious Affairs Regulations, which restrict proselytization, and through its daily practice of violence and intimidation toward independent religious groups — a powerful deterrent to anybody considering joining one of those groups. Membership in an independent house church is a dangerous activity. Unlike many persecuting countries, China does not promote or protect any one religion and therefore does not have a blasphemy law, which would criminalize leaving the state-favored religion.

POLITICS

While nationalism in some countries stems from popular opinion and the fervor of mobs, anti-religious nationalism in China is intentionally perpetuated by the state and entrenched in the government through the political system. The CCP uses political loyalty as a litmus test for religious leaders, who must promote party slogans in sermons and events. Independent political or religious criticism is quickly silenced through surveillance, detention, or enforced disappearance in an effort to ensure that faith cannot exist outside the umbrella of party legitimacy.

EDUCATION

Religious education is tightly restricted, especially for minors. Children younger than 18 are legally barred from entering religious venues or participating in worship, severing intergenerational faith traditions. State schools promote atheism and party loyalty, displacing religious instruction. While the five state-run religious institutions are allowed to operate schools, they are strictly prohibited from teaching religion as part of their curriculum. These educational barriers are designed to prevent cultural transmission and ensure that future generations identify more with CCP ideology than with faith.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

Arbitrary arrest remains a key tool of religious repression in China. House church leaders are frequently detained for organizing unregistered worship, often disappearing into custody for months or years without trial.⁵ The opacity of China's judicial system means many cases go unreported, but testimonies from families confirm ongoing detention campaigns aimed at silencing religious leadership and eroding community resilience.

Beginning in 2017, the Chinese government began imprisoning millions of Uyghur Muslims in large-scale concentration camps. Euphemistically referred to as “reeducation camps” by the Chinese government, these facilities held up to 3 million people at their peak. Leaked information from the camps shows terrible conditions and systematic abuse of the Uyghur people in the government's attempt to stamp out their religious identity — the same motivation for China's persecution of independent Christians.

SURVEILLANCE

China's surveillance state remains unparalleled, using facial recognition, big data, and AI to monitor religious communities. State-sponsored churches are required to install cameras linked to state systems, and online religious content is heavily censored. Diaspora groups also face monitoring abroad, with reports of harassment and intimidation extending into Western countries. Officials use the data captured by these systems to track and control those deemed a danger to the state. Notably, this includes anybody associated with the unregistered house church movement and anyone else who might desire to practice religion outside the confines of the state-run institutions.

Continued revelations of overseas influence operations targeting religious minorities underscore how surveillance is both domestic and transnational. This environment creates constant fear among believers, forcing religious practice further underground.

ICC NEWSROOM

China Expands Crackdown on Independent Churches July 18, 2025

Recent reports and firsthand testimony from Christians in China indicate that the Chinese government is persecuting the church with renewed vigor as it implements new regulations on foreign missionaries and the worship practices of local believers.

In April, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) released new regulations reinforcing its ban on independent foreign missionary activity. While the CCP does allow a small number of missionaries to operate under strict government control, these regulations prohibit foreigners from preaching, sharing their faith, or establishing religious organizations without official approval.

In May, the government announced the “2025 Church Music Ministry Blueprint,” establishing strict guidelines for worship in government-approved churches. Among other provisions, the blueprint calls for the creation of new hymns to spread CCP propaganda and the alteration of existing worship music to align with official party dogma.

Authorities Raid Multiple Zion Church Locations in China Aug. 23, 2024

China’s crackdown on Christianity continues as multiple branches and locations of the Zion Church have been raided.

In late May and early June, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials harassed several churches, detaining pastors and questioning church attendees, further demonstrating their agenda to suppress religious freedom.

Beijing Zion Church, once Beijing’s largest house church with 1,500 members, was banned by authorities in 2018, forcing the church to spread to other locations, where it has been repeatedly raided and dispersed. Despite the government’s efforts to eradicate the church, the congregation remains steadfast, meeting in secret and changing locations to evade the CCP, which has not deterred their determination.

Authorities raided the Zion Church in Hefei, Anhui Province, along with several church members’ homes, on May 30. When Pastor Gao Le, who was away at the time, heard about his fellow believers being rounded up, he returned as soon as he could. Authorities detained him for five days.

China’s CCP Prioritizes Communism in Church Worship June 13, 2025

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), China’s ruling political class, released a plan on May 7 mandating Protestant churches to alter their worship music to include songs and lyrics praising communism, according to Christian Daily International (CDI).

“The mandate has sparked serious concern, as it is viewed not merely as a formal adjustment but as a deliberate shift intended to displace God from the center of worship and replace Him with loyalty to the Communist Party,” the report stated.

The plan is part of the nation’s Sacred Music Ministry Blueprint for 2025, which will advance China’s plan to install elements of communism and Chinese patriotism within Christianity. On May 7, about 40 Christian church leaders gathered to devise ways of adding CCP values into church worship music.

China Moves to Formally Ban Missionary Activity April 4, 2025

New regulations released this week by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) impose severe restrictions on missionary activity in the country, according to Chinese state media and representatives of the Chinese Communist Party.

The regulations, which take effect May 1, prohibit foreigners from preaching, sharing their faith, or establishing religious organizations without official government approval.

Justifying these regulations, Chinese state media claimed that the newly revised rules promote national security — a common justification for CCP persecution of religion — and help to protect “normal religious activities,” referring to activities run under strict government oversight as part of state-run religious institutions.

CITATIONS

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To read more persecution news from China and other regions, visit www.persecution.org



LEGAL TAKE

By ICC Human Rights Counsel

“But what about China?” That’s the inevitable question in any discussion about the effectiveness of the legal fight for religious freedom (and human rights in general). China’s status as “the world’s factory” has made it largely immune to the international laws and norms that can be used to pressure most other nations. Yet unlike rogue states (see entry on North Korea) or even failed states (see entry on the Democratic Republic of Congo), China still enjoys the economic and diplomatic benefits of the developed world despite a disastrous human rights record that is beyond dispute.

What makes China so difficult to confront is how effective it has legally isolated itself on human rights. China is outside the compulsory jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice, prosecutors at the International Criminal Court cannot indict Chinese human rights violators, and China’s permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council renders most human rights mechanisms of the United Nations moot. Does this mean human rights law cannot help the Chinese church?

Not at all. There are several U.S. and other foreign laws and mechanisms that have already proven very effective at hindering or even crippling similar regimes. What is lacking is the political willpower to make it a foreign policy priority.

ICC AT WORK

ICC supported a project in late 2024 providing Biblical teaching, theological training, and leadership training for a large underground house church movement. We continue to engage with partners and plan initiatives this year.

CONCLUSION

Religious persecution in China in 2025 reflected the deep entrenchment of Sinicization and authoritarian control. From the ongoing internment system in Xinjiang to restrictions on Christian house churches, the CCP continues to define religion as a tool to measure political loyalty.

These measures are framed through counterterrorism rhetoric, which labels ordinary religious practices as extreme and allows the state to normalize repression. Women, children, and minority groups remain disproportionately affected, highlighting the gendered and generational dimensions of China’s campaign.

Surveillance technology plays an increasingly central role, extending beyond China’s borders to monitor diaspora communities. Internally, every aspect of worship — from architecture to sermons — is regulated, leaving little space for authentic religious expression.

While international organizations like International Christian Concern (ICC) and governments continue to condemn China’s abuses, accountability remains elusive. The combination of population decline, demographic anxiety, and political insecurity only intensifies the party’s determination to control Christianity and all forms of belief.

China’s religious landscape stands as one of the starkest examples of authoritarian repression. The persistence of faith under such conditions demonstrates the resilience of believers, yet the risks they face remain severe. Without sustained advocacy and global pressure, persecution is set to deepen further.

CHINA

DESIGNATION

COUNTRY STATUS

SWL

CPC

COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR CONCERN: 2023-2026

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1

LEVEL 2

LEVEL 3

LEVEL 4

EXERCISE INCREASED CAUTION to China due civil arbitrary enforcement of local laws, including in relation to exit bans. (As of Nov. 27, 2024)

BY THE NUMBERS

Between July 1, 2024, and July 1, 2025

600

CHRISTIANS ARRESTED

16

ATTACKS ON HOUSEHOLDS

31

CHRISTIANS SENTENCED

8

CHRISTIANS ABDUCTIONS

THESE FIGURES REPRESENT ONLY A SMALL PORTION OF THE LARGER PERSECUTION PICTURE.

International Christian Concern (ICC) partners with the International Institute for Religious Freedom to support its Violent Incidents Database.

INDONESIA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD): The threat of extremist violence continues to threaten Indonesia's Christian population, especially in certain provinces like Aceh and West Java, where fundamentalist Islam is stronger and the social pressure on Christians greater. Attacks can happen anywhere in the country. In July 2025, a group of Muslim men attacked a church-affiliated building in West Sumatra during a class for children.¹

JAD was formed in 2015 when more than a dozen terrorist groups joined forces under an Islamic State banner. According to a 2024 report from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), JAD particularly targets Christians thought to be sharing their faith with others.² While the group has not staged any successful large-scale attacks in recent years, it continues to threaten peaceful minority communities.³

Indonesia Ulema Council (MUI): The MUI is the leading body of Islamic scholars in Indonesia and a group that remains active in shaping law and policy across the country. Concerningly, the MUI has long used its influence to preserve what it sees as the ideological purity of Islam in the country in a manner that ostracizes and limits the freedoms of groups seen as outside orthodox Islam. It has, for example, lobbied the government to ban

Ahmadiyya Muslims as a deviant sect and worked publicly and privately to bolster blasphemy laws, which criminalize religious expression that falls outside its interpretation of Islam.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Jalaluddin, Wilayatul Hisbah: Beginning in 2001, the central government of Indonesia exempted Aceh Province, the country's northernmost, from certain national laws and began allowing the government there to implement a version of the Sharia criminal code. While the move was reportedly an attempt to reduce local calls for secession, the result has severely limited the rights and freedoms enjoyed by non-Muslims in the province.

Tasked with enforcing Sharia law in Aceh, Wilayatul Hisbah has grown into a significant force and a real threat to local Christians because of its extensive powers and ideological foundation. Jalaluddin is widely reported to lead Wilayatul Hisbah, though details about him — including his full name — and his exact role are scarce.

QUICK FACTS

Region: Southeast Asia

Population: 281.56 million

Religious Demography:

- 87% Muslim
- 11% Christian
- 2% Hindu

Language:

- Bahasa Indonesia



“Despite high-profile efforts at encouraging interfaith tolerance, Indonesian Christians face continued persecution from the government and extremist groups alike.” —ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

NATIONALISM

While the government makes an effort to encourage interfaith understanding and talks about tolerance, national rhetoric often implicitly privileges Muslim identity over other traditions. In areas like Aceh, identity is closely mixed with these religious undertones, making it difficult for nonconformists to fully fit in. And the legal structure at both the local and national levels gives a place of primacy to Islamic tradition as encapsulated in Sharia law.

EXTREMISM

Terrorism remains a danger for Christians and members of other disfavored religious groups. Though levels of actual violence appear to have declined in recent years, the pressure created by terror groups nevertheless remains high. The government, which also faces the threat of violence from these groups, has banned many. While these groups are now less visible as a result, they still exert ideological influence, harass Christians, vandalize churches, and disrupt worship services.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

Passed in 2022, Indonesia's new criminal code is set to become effective in January 2026 and expands the country's provisions against blasphemy and apostasy, among other developments that pose grave concerns for human rights. Termed "disastrous" by Human Rights Watch, which led early efforts to analyze the changes, the law broadens the definition of blasphemy and adds an apostasy law to the books for the first time.

Even before these updates, Indonesian authorities were aggressive in their actions against those perceived as blaspheming, in some cases sentencing them to 10 years in prison, as was the case in 2022 for a Christian YouTuber. According to a U.S. report, the average sentence for convicted terrorists in Indonesia is only three years, while the new criminal code suggests three years for blasphemy cases.⁶

POLITICS

Politics remains deeply interwoven with religious freedom issues. The election of President Prabowo Subianto in early 2024 raised concerns among minorities and civil society about his past connections with the military and conservative Islam, particularly given his support for blasphemy laws. Legislative and regulatory changes — especially the criminal code — stem from political consensus among ruling coalitions to balance conservative pressures with international obligations. Politicians sometimes use religious identity as leverage in local elections, and political parties may court Islamist organizations.

EDUCATION

Indonesian law requires that public school students take classes on religion. While students may ask to be placed in courses that teach any of the recognized religions, these requests are not always honored, due to limited teacher availability, and students outside of these six recognized religions do not have an option to receive education in their faith or to opt out of these classes, which are mandatory for all students.

PLACES OF WORSHIP

Religious buildings are required to obtain a special permit called an IMB, and a 2006 decree on houses of worship continues to create obstacles for groups, especially Christians, who want to build. According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), protestant churches face significant challenges on this front, and there have been instances in which mobs have used the claim of expired permits to disrupt services and refuse the establishment of churches in their area.⁷

DESIGNATION

COUNTRY STATUS

SWL CPC

SPECIAL WATCHLIST: 2023-2026

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1 LEVEL 2 LEVEL 3 LEVEL 4

EXERCISE INCREASED CAUTION to Indonesia due to terrorism and natural disasters. (As of April 30, 2025)

REPORTS



Indonesia 2023 International Religious Freedom Report

United States Department of State



2025 USCIRF Annual Report: Indonesia (p.58)

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

ICC NEWSROOM

Updated Blasphemy Regulations Set to Take Effect in Indonesia Sept. 25, 2025

A new penal code, applicable to both Indonesian nationals and foreigners, will take effect in January 2026. Part of this new code consists of updated blasphemy regulations.

Indonesia has had a blasphemy law since 1965. Multiple attempts have been made — including one by a former Indonesian president — to remove it from the nation’s legal code. But the blasphemy law has proven a resilient survivor.

With more than 285 million people, Indonesia is the world’s largest majority-Muslim country. And though Muslims comprise more than 85% of the population, there is no official state religion, and Indonesia’s constitution has provisions intended to safeguard freedom for six religions, including Protestantism and Catholicism.

Indonesia has received praise for maintaining a religiously diverse society. But its 38 provinces can vary heavily in their degree of extremism and willingness to act on it.

Elderly Christian Released from Prison in Indonesia July 17, 2025

After serving more than four years behind bars, an elderly Christian man has been released from prison in Indonesia.

International Christian Concern (ICC) field staff have learned that Apollinaris Darmawan was freed from the Kebon Waru Prison in November 2024. His release comes about a year earlier than expected after he received “several remissions” to his original sentence. This is the second time Darmawan has been imprisoned for his faith.

Police arrested Darmawan in late 2020 after someone accused him of insulting the Prophet Muhammad and Islam on social media. The Bandung District Court sentenced Darmawan to a maximum of five years for blasphemy. The court also fined him nearly 800 million rupiahs (about \$50,000) for “disseminating information aimed at causing hatred or dissension on individuals and certain groups of the community based on ethnic groups, religions, races, and inter-groups.”

During his most recent imprisonment, Darmawan remained steadfast in his faith. Supported by dozens of letters from ICC’s Prison Letter Writing Campaign and several visits from ICC staff, he stayed spiritually and physically strong, walking nearly two miles inside the prison grounds daily, and relying on prayer to sustain him.

To read more persecution news from Indonesia and other regions, visit www.persecution.org

60 Years Later, Complete Bible Translated in Contentious Indonesian Province

May 14, 2025

After 60 years of faithful work across two generations of one family in missions, the Bible has been fully translated into the Ngalik language in the Indonesian Province of Papua.

The Ngalik New Testament was completed in 1992 after 25 years of labor by Ed and Shirley Maxey, missionaries from the Christian and Missionary Alliance. Two young men named Amos and Enos helped the couple with the project. Building on the Maxeys’ work, the couple’s son, Buzz, and his wife, Myrna, worked with Amos and Enos to complete the Old Testament translation in 2023.

The completion of the Ngalik Bible, as well as the missions work the Maxeys and local Christians had done, was celebrated at a dedication ceremony in February. The completion of the translation occurred as Papuan Christians face increasing persecution in their province.

Indonesia Arrests 181 Terrorists in Last Year Nov. 22, 2024

In the past year, Indonesian authorities have arrested 181 suspected terrorists, National Police Chief General Listyo Sigit Prabowo said during the 79th Anniversary of the Brimob Corps’ Thanksgiving event on Nov. 14 at Mako Brimob Kelapa Dua, Depok.

The arrests, he said, were successful thanks to a collaboration between the Brimob Corps and the National Police’s Counterterrorism Special Detachment 88 (Densus 88). Prabowo added that the role of the Brimob Corps is essential.

“Of course, the role of Brimob is always to be present to maintain public order and security,” he said.

CITATIONS

¹ <https://persecution.org/2025/07/28/several-men-attack-prayer-house-in-indonesia/>

² <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2024-05/USCIRF%202024%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

³ <https://www.ucanews.com/news/bomb-threat-sees-security-beefed-up-at-indonesian-catholic-university/107008>

⁴ <https://seputaraceh.id/2025/05/17/satuan-polisi-pamong-praja-dan-wilayah-hisbah-satpol-pp-wh-aceh-bersama-kantor-wilayah-direktorat-jenderal-bea-dan-cukai-djbc-aceh-menyelenggarakan-kegiatan-sosialisasi-ketentuan-cukai-hasil-tem/an>

⁵ <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/half-hearted-progress-religious-freedom-after-the-new-criminal-code/>

⁶ <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2022/indonesia>

⁷ <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report.pdf#page=58>

ICC AT WORK

- Support for underground churches, hidden workers, pastors, Muslim background-believers (MBBs), and evangelists to encourage them to continue to follow Jesus and spread the gospel in hostile places.
- Equipment for a church worship program, training for more than 50 at a youth camp, MBB discipleship, and evangelism training.
- 130 Bibles to MBBs, prisoners, and pastors.
- Covered funeral and other expenses for a family whose child was beaten to death because of his Christian faith.
- Provided seminary tuition for two MBBs as they prepare to work with house churches and groups.
- Learning activities and materials for a children's club of 200 students and mentors.

CONCLUSION

Indonesia remains a country of contrasts. Formally committed to religious pluralism under its constitution and Pancasila ideology, it still experiences legal, social, and political pressures that threaten religious minorities, converts, and those outside mainstream Muslim beliefs.

Sadly, Indonesia's religiously pluralistic history seems to be fading in the face of new laws and practices hindering access to true religious freedom. Only six religions — Sunni Islam, Catholicism, Protestant Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism — are allowed to operate at all, and even then under an ever-tightening set of legal restrictions.

The formal expansion of blasphemy and apostasy-related provisions in the new criminal code — while just being implemented — represents a turning point. Once active, it could institutionalize many practices of exclusion and grant powerful actors additional tools to criminalize dissent or non-traditional beliefs.

Meanwhile, state capacity, regional divergence, and societal actors such as radical Islamist groups or conservative community mobs continue to cause harm on the ground. Attacks such as the July 2025 disruption of Christian education services in Padang underscore how non-violent mechanisms like harassment, permit denials, and social sanctions often operate alongside overt violence. Women and converts are among those most vulnerable — their faith journeys are marked by family pressure, societal isolation, and legal uncertainty.

On the positive side, there are some efforts to bolster interreligious dialogue and legal reform, and many religious minorities continue to practice their faith, albeit under pressure. In 2026, the effectiveness of the criminal code's rollout, the strength of judicial checks, and civil society resistance will likely determine whether these pressures intensify or can be constrained.



BY THE NUMBERS

Between July 1, 2024, and July 1, 2025

3

CHRISTIANS KILLED

13

**ATTACKS ON CHURCHES
AND BUILDINGS**

139

**INCIDENTS OF PHYSICAL
OR MENTAL ABUSE**

7

ATTACKS ON HOMES

**THESE FIGURES REPRESENT
ONLY A SMALL PORTION OF THE
LARGER PERSECUTION PICTURE.**

International Christian Concern (ICC) partners with the International Institute for Religious Freedom to support its Violent Incidents Database.

MALAYSIA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

The Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM): JAKIM is the national-level body, operating under the prime minister, directly responsible for planning and coordinating Islamic affairs in Malaysia. As such, it collaborates closely with the National Fatwa Council and state Islamic authorities to elevate Islam and coordinate enforcement of Islamic law across federal and state levels. As part of its efforts to promote Islam, JAKIM also oversees Islamic education, with reports surfacing in 2025 that it had illegally forced non-Muslim students to attend Islamic courses.¹ JAKIM also works to quell social media content that it deems to be insulting to Islam, reporting what it considers to be blasphemous content to other authorities on the grounds of promoting social harmony.²

Sharia Courts: Malaysia operates under a confusing array of legal systems that have never been fully resolved with each other. States are responsible for administering Sharia law, though a separate federal legal system also exists, albeit in a constitutionally-determined second place to state-administered Sharia law. State-level authorities continue to exert influence, especially in matters of conversion, identity registration, and religious education. For example, there are ongoing issues with children being registered or having their religion status changed to Islam, especially when one parent is Muslim or when indigenous communities migrate or interact with the

state bureaucracy.³

Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS):

Political parties like PAS and elements within coalitions or government that appeal to Malay-Muslim identity are continuing to exert pressure on minority religious communities. There is a trend of promoting Islamized policy or guidelines that affect non-Muslims, with new guidelines for Muslim participation in non-Muslim celebrations, attempts to frame policies under the banner of “religious harmony,” which may disadvantage religious minorities, and involvement of government in religious matters through institutions like JAKIM.⁴

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Dato’ Haji Mohd Shahzihan Bin Ahmadz:

Mohd Shahzihan, director of the Selangor State Islamic Religious Department (JAIS), is a leading Islamic figure in one of the country’s most influential states. Selangor boasts the largest state GDP in the country and borders the federal territories, making it a model for other state-level Islamic departments. In 2023, Selangor declared it unlawful for Muslims to visit non-Muslim places of worship to learn about their faith.⁵ These types of regulations, targeting and restricting Muslims from following their conscience freely, are unfortunately all too common across the country.

QUICK FACTS

Region: Southeast Asia

Population: 34.56 million

Religious Demography:

- 64% Muslim
- 19% Buddhist
- 9% Christian
- 6% Hindu
- 2% Other

Language:

- Bahasa Malaysia



“In Malaysia, constitutional guarantees of religious freedom remain overshadowed by laws and practices that pressure Christians and minorities and restrict the rights of ethnic Malays to choose their faith.” —ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

NATIONALISM

While Malaysia has a significant religious minority population — nearly 40% of the country ascribes to Christianity or a non-Muslim faith — government authorities and Malaysian society alike view non-Muslim identity as something reserved for ethnic minorities. Ethnic Malays are required to follow Islam, and proselytizing a Malay to some other religion is also banned.

EXTREMISM

While Malaysia has achieved notable success in suppressing terrorism within its borders, undercurrents of radical Islamist extremism remain entrenched in both society and governance. The influence of Aby Sayff, also known as Islamic State-East Asia Province, and other jihadist groups, is helping radical Islam spread, particularly in Sabah, Borneo. Hate speech against religious minorities is widespread on social media, and supporters of the PAS political party and other groups have mobilized in public demonstrations backing policies aligned with extremist ideology.

At the federal and state levels, elements of radical Islam are embedded in law and enforcement. This is evident in federal provisions against blasphemy and state legislation that criminalizes apostasy, including cases where individuals seek to leave Islam for another religion. These frameworks reinforce systemic pressures on religious minorities and restrict freedom of belief.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

Chapter XV of the Malaysian penal code contains provisions criminalizing blasphemy.⁶ In essence, the regulations provide a legal framework for the criminalization of non-Islamic speech and activity and imposes long terms in prison for activities that provide any kind of religious offense.⁷ A separate law, the Communications and Multimedia Act of 1998, is used by officials to prohibit blasphemous statements online. In addition to these national laws, at least five states outlaw apostasy — leaving Islam — with fines, prison sentences, or forced detention in a rehabilitation center, according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.⁸

EDUCATION

Islamic religious education is a major part of the public school curriculum. A 2022 report cited by the U.S. Department of State found that 16% of primary students' time in school was spent on "Islamic religious education, while schools allocated 12% for mathematics, 7% for science, and 7% for arts."⁹

There are reports that indigenous and Christian students are pressured to attend Islamic religious classes or activities. A major focus on Islamic education helps to perpetuate the supremacy of Islam in the country, despite the broadly pluralistic society made up of many faith traditions.

MISSIONARY ACTIVITY

Missionaries and local Christians face major obstacles in reaching ethnic Malays due to restrictive government regulations. Article 160 of the Malaysian Constitution classifies all ethnic Malays as Muslim by default, leaving no legal avenue for those who wish to convert to Christianity or another faith. Because of these restrictions, many local churches avoid evangelizing Malays or accepting Malay converts into their congregations.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

Five masked men abducted Pastor Raymond Koh on Feb. 13, 2017, and there is still no update on his whereabouts. In November 2025, the High Court of Malaysia ordered the Malaysian government to pay the equivalent of more than \$7 million to the pastor's family, acknowledging the government's involvement in his abduction and disappearance. The court concluded that authorities likely "disappeared" the pastor because it saw him as a threat to Islam. The government is believed to be behind other disappearances, pointing to a larger strategy of silencing critics or those it deems a threat.

BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

Malaysian Borneo generally experiences a somewhat greater degree of religious freedom, as its indigenous communities historically practiced traditional tribal faiths before the arrival of Christianity. Although Islamists are sending government-funded "ustads" or evangelists to the region, the government permits access to a translation of the Bible there that is banned on the mainland because it uses the word "Allah" to refer to the Christian God — terminology considered offensive in Peninsular Malaysia. As a result, ethnic Malays on the mainland have no access to this translation of the Bible.

From ICC's Southeast Asia Regional Director

The increasing trend of Islamification in Malaysia raises several concerns for non-Muslim communities, with potential implications for their rights and social standing in the coming years. Here's a breakdown of key areas of concern:

- **Legal and Judicial Systems:** The expansion of Sharia law's influence leads to a dual legal system where non-Muslims feel their civil rights are not adequately protected. Concerns exist regarding the potential for Sharia law to encroach on areas traditionally governed by civil law.
- **Religious Freedom:** Restrictions on proselytization and conversion can limit the freedom of non-Muslims to practice and share their faith. There are concerns about unequal treatment in matters of religious expression.
- **Social and Cultural Integration:** The emphasis on Malay-Muslim identity leads to feelings of marginalization among non-Malay communities. Social tensions arise from differing cultural and religious practices.
- **Education and Employment:** The incorporation of Islamic values into the national education curriculum creates a sense of exclusion for non-Muslim students. This often leads to non-Malay, non-Muslims not getting key jobs in the government sector (and other industries) because of the Islamification and bias against non-Muslims.
- **Political Representation:** The increased use of religious rhetoric in politics continues to divide communities and affect the political representation of non-Muslims. The growing influence of political parties that strongly push for Islamic laws causes anxiety and fear within non-Muslim communities.

ICC NEWSROOM

Malaysian Court Orders Government Payment to Pastor Raymond Koh's Family

Nov. 6, 2025

The High Court of Malaysia has ordered the Malaysian government to pay 31 million ringgit (more than \$7 million) to the family of Pastor Raymond Koh, acknowledging the government's involvement in the pastor's abduction and disappearance.

The court concluded that authorities likely "disappeared" the pastor as a threat to Islam.

Pastor Koh was abducted on Feb. 13, 2017, by five masked men in a coordinated operation, as seen in viral video footage of the kidnapping. There has been no update on Pastor Koh's whereabouts since his capture.

Pastor Koh's wife, Susanna Koh, filed a suit against the Malaysian government for their complicity in the abduction and the subsequent unjust and slow investigation of her husband's disappearance.

Malaysian High Court Rules Muslim Preacher's Secret Conversion Video Unlawful

July 15, 2025

In a significant ruling, Malaysia's High Court has declared a TikTok video by preacher Firdaus Wong Wai Hung that encourages non-Muslim minors to convert to Islam as unconstitutional and unlawful.

The decision reinforces parental rights under Malaysia's Federal Constitution and has sparked renewed discussions on religious freedom, parental authority, and the role of faith in public spaces.

Justice Amarjeet Singh, presiding at the Kuala Lumpur High Court, ordered Firdaus to remove the controversial video from all social media platforms and issued a permanent injunction prohibiting similar content in the future. Firdaus was also ordered to pay 10,000 MYR (about \$2,350) in legal costs to the eight non-Muslim parents who filed the lawsuit.

The case originated from a June 2024 TikTok video in which Firdaus advised a social media influencer on how to handle non-Muslim minors interested in converting to Islam without their parents' knowledge. The preacher reportedly suggested keeping such conversions secret and unregistered, prompting widespread outrage among non-Muslim parents.

To read more persecution news from Malaysia and other regions, visit www.persecution.org

Betrayal of Faith, Identity, and the Shadow of Systemic Islamization in Sabah, Malaysia

April 30, 2025

The news from Nabawan, Sabah, has understandably filled many with profound dismay and righteous anger. Disturbing reports of Sabahans, who are proud members of the indigenous Murut community and devout Christians, are being deceitfully registered as Muslims without their knowledge or explicit consent.

This forced and deceptive conversion is not merely a misguided act; it is a grave betrayal, a blatant assault on the fundamental principles of personal dignity, the universally recognized right to religious freedom, and the very core of individual belief. This isn't an isolated incident; it sadly echoes a troubling pattern of religious manipulation and a perceived agenda of systemic Islamization that has cast a long shadow over Sabah, particularly in the painful aftermath of the deeply contentious "Project IC" from 1970 to 1990.

Malaysian Government, JAKIM Allegedly Coercing Students to Convert to Islam

Jan. 16, 2025

Recent reports have surfaced alleging that the Malaysian government, in collaboration with the Islamic institution JAKIM, is employing tactics to pressure non-Muslim students into converting to Islam during university orientation programs.

These allegations raise serious concerns about religious freedom, coercion, and the rights of individuals to make informed decisions about their faith.

According to multiple sources, non-Muslim students are being subjected to a variety of tactics designed to induce conversion.

CITATIONS

¹ <https://persecution.org/2025/01/16/malaysian-government-jakim-allegedly-coercing-students-to-convert-to-islam/>

² <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2025/03/06/jakim-lodges-police-report-over-social-media-post-mocking-islam-calls-for-firm-action/168742>

³ <https://www.thevibes.com/articles/news/107459/villagers-in-sabah-find-themselves-listed-as-muslims-without-their-knowledge>

⁴ <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2025/02/05/new-rules-proposed-for-muslims-attending-events-in-non-muslim-houses-of-worship>

⁵ <https://malaysia.news.yahoo.com/mais-chairman-unlawful-muslims-visit-034045495.html>

⁶ <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Blasphemy%20Laws%20Report.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Blasphemy%20Laws%20Report.pdf#page=80>

⁸ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/malaysia/>

⁹ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/malaysia/>

ICC AT WORK

- ICC is executing multiple projects in response to Christian persecution in Malaysia, including helping Christian converts from Islam establish small businesses, Bible distributions, and support for house churches.



LEGAL TAKE

By ICC Human Rights Counsel

A common tactic of control in Islamic republics is the use of government IDs. Given the integration of religious Sharia law with civil government systems, a person's religion can have tangible consequences when dealing with the courts and basic government services.

Malaysia's official ID card is called the MyKad. And as all ethnic Malays are constitutionally presumed to be Muslims, cards of ethnic Malays will automatically have "Islam" printed on them regardless of the person's actual religion. In 2024, a Christian man named Rieno Glant Olean George won a lawsuit to have "Islam" removed from his ID card, but the court only permitted this because he was born to Christian parents and had never converted to Islam. While this is a victory for Christian families with history in the region, the court explained the case shouldn't be transferred to a Sharia court because Rieno had "never been a Muslim," leading to the conclusion that a Christian convert's case would be heard by an Islamic court. This only goes to show the deeply entrenched, institutional discrimination that Muslim background believers face in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

Though less than two-thirds of Malaysia's population identifies as Muslim, the government has created a system designed to restrict Christians at every turn. Muslims are also subject to strict government control, with officials taking an invasively active role in operating the internal affairs of Muslim and non-Muslim groups alike.

While the Federal Constitution provides for freedom of religion, other constitutional provisions as well as federal and state laws continue to tilt the playing field: speech laws, administrative registration of religion, education policies, and religious department activities all combine to create systemic pressures.

The overlap of religion, ethnicity, and politics amplifies the pressure: religious identity is often politicized, and political actors have incentives to appeal to Muslim majorities, especially in states under PAS influence.

The path forward for Malaysia will require sustained commitment from both domestic leaders and the international community to advance genuine religious freedom. By working together, Malaysia and its allies can help create an environment where diverse religious communities not only coexist but thrive, strengthening national unity while upholding universal human rights.

DESIGNATION

COUNTRY STATUS

SWL

CPC

SPECIAL WATCHLIST: 2023-2026

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1

LEVEL 2

LEVEL 3

LEVEL 4

EXERCISE NORMAL PRECAUTIONS in Malaysia. Some areas have increased risk. (As of Feb. 22, 2026)

REPORTS



Malaysia 2023 International Religious Freedom Report

United States Department of State



2025 USCIRF Annual Report: Malaysia (p.60)

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

Note on names: “Burma” and “Myanmar” are two names for the same country. The terms are often used interchangeably, though some ethnic minorities, who may not speak Burmese, prefer the more western “Burma” as a mark of protest against the military regime, which prefers “Myanmar,” a word with more exclusive linguistic ties to the Burman ethnic majority.

However, both names are derived from Burmese names for the Burman people. While the link between “Burman” and “Burma” is more obvious to English speakers, “Myanmar” is derived from “Myanmar Pyi,” the written form of the spoken word “Burman” in the Burmese language.

MYANMAR

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Tatmadaw: The Burmese military, known in local parlance as the Tatmadaw, is the primary source of persecution in Myanmar. Responsible for airstrikes against schools, monasteries, churches, and vulnerable civilian centers, the Tatmadaw has fought the country’s civilian population for more than 75 years in what is known as the world’s longest ongoing civil war. The Tatmadaw’s ultimate goal is complete control of the country — an aspiration it has consistently failed at, with current analysis suggesting that it controls only about 20% to 25% of the country’s territory.

State Administration Council (SAC):

The SAC rose as the governing entity in Myanmar after the Tatmadaw seized power from a duly elected civilian government in February 2021. Dedicated to furthering the Tatmadaw’s grip on power, the SAC has brutally repressed pro-democracy activists and representatives of the country’s many ethnoreligious minority groups. The SAC also manages the junta’s international relations and funnels hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of weapons and military supplies into the country, largely from allies such as China, Russia, and Thailand.¹

Buddhist Nationalists: While the Tatmadaw, empowered by the SAC, is by far the most egregious persecutor in

the country, it exists in tandem with a movement among certain elements of society toward Buddhist nationalism. Both inspired by Buddhist nationalist extremism and enabling of it, the Tatmadaw has overseen a marked increase in hatred toward Christians and religious minorities. In a particularly tragic example, the Tatmadaw fostered Buddhist extremism in the early 2010s that led to the ongoing Rohingya genocide.²

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Min Aung Hlaing: Min Aung Hlaing is Myanmar’s military chief and government leader after seizing power via coup in February 2021. Six years later he continues to exercise supreme authority as president of the country and chairman of the State Security and Peace Commission while also retaining command of the armed forces. Under his leadership, the military conducts widespread airstrikes on civilian infrastructure, including schools and religious buildings, authorizes arrests and torture, and presides over the displacement of millions of people in conflict zones. His consolidation of power formalizes military control over elections and national governance, entrenching persecution as part of state policy.

QUICK FACTS

Region: Southeast Asia

Population: 57.52 million

Religious Demography:

- 88% Buddhist
- 6% Christian
- 4% Hindu
- 2% Others

Language: Burmese



“Decades into the world’s longest civil war, the people of Myanmar continue to suffer targeted ethnoreligious persecution at the hands of a cruel military junta bent on their destruction.” —ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

NATIONALISM

Buddhist nationalism remains a foundational driver of persecution in Myanmar. The regime, allied militias, and extremist voices promote the idea of a Myanmar identity tightly bound to Buddhist extremism, marginalizing Rohingya Muslims and ethnic minority Christians. Religious identity is viewed through the lens of religio-national conformity, with little or no room given to differing faith traditions.

EXTREMISM

Nationalism has grown into full-scale religious extremism in many parts of Myanmar, often a result of online disinformation campaigns and the amplification of radical Buddhist leaders on social media. Wild conspiracies about religious minorities are allowed to gain traction online, driving furor among extremist factions and deepening already serious divides between the Buddhist majority and various minority communities.³ The military has enabled this swing toward extremism and even contributes its own material to the mass of online misinformation fueling hatred in the country.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

According to research conducted by ICC on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Burmese law contains restrictions on proselytization and interfaith marriage, and requires that individuals wishing to change religious affiliation must apply to the government and face questioning as to whether their conversion is genuine.⁴ While the Tatmadaw has, in many cases, stopped enforcing legal norms in place under the previous civilian government, these restrictions continue to reflect a national environment of discomfort with the widely accepted norms of international religious freedom.

POLITICS

Since taking power in 2021, the Tatmadaw has imposed draconian restrictions on political activism, killing more than 7,000 individuals from the opposition and arresting nearly 30,000 people as of September 2025. The junta consistently discussed national elections throughout 2025, but analysts were consistent in panning the election exercise as a shallow attempt to provide democratic bona fides to an anti-democratic government. Given the junta's tiny area of control and refusal to allow all opposition parties to run candidates, it is widely understood that any election would be a sham designed to puff up the junta.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

Arrests are arbitrary and widespread. Religious leaders, pastors, activists, and journalists are arrested under vague laws such as counterterrorism, incitement, and unlawful association. Children are detained as proxies for their parents.⁵ The Tatmadaw's core concern is to maintain its grip on power, so many of those detained were in some way associated with the pro-democracy movement or a disfavored ethnoreligious minority that has raised the junta's ire. Ethnoreligious organizations are among the most potent organizing forces pushing back against the junta and so are frequently singled out for severe mistreatment.

REFUGEES & IDP CAMPS

Millions have been displaced from religious minority communities. The Muslim Rohingya have faced particularly systematic displacement, with massive displacement an issue in Christian-majority Chin state and in Kachin and Karen states as well. Camps for internally displaced persons are overcrowded and lack adequate food, health care, and security. Religious minorities often face heightened risks, as Christian and Muslim communities are disproportionately targeted in military airstrikes and raids, forcing entire congregations to flee their villages. Displacement intersects with religious freedom as believers are denied safe places to worship or gather. Churches and mosques are destroyed or abandoned, while makeshift worship in camps may be monitored or suppressed.

WOMEN

Women in Myanmar, especially from ethnic and religious minorities, face heightened vulnerability. Armed militia and junta operations have used systematic sexual and gender-based violence as tools of terror — rape, gang rape, sexualized torture, forced nudity, and mutilation are reported in ground operations, village raids, at checkpoints, and in detention facilities.⁶

In IDP and refugee settings, women's rights to religious practice and dignity are severely compromised. Camps are overcrowded, lacking privacy and secure shelter and exposing women to exploitation and violence.

ICC NEWSROOM

U.N. Meeting on Atrocities in Myanmar Highlights Ongoing Persecution

Oct. 7, 2025

The United Nations convened a high-level conference on the plight of Rohingya Muslims and other ethnoreligious minorities in Myanmar during the U.N. General Assembly gathering last week.

The event featured representatives of the Rohingya community as well as U.N. officials and leaders from around the world who expressed their concern for Myanmar's beleaguered civilian population and called for a coordinated international response to the crisis.

"It is long past time for other governments and actors in the region to develop sustainable solutions for the Rohingya," Charles Harder, a U.S. special envoy for children's issues, said at the event. He also promised \$60 million in assistance funding for refugees currently in Bangladesh.

Myanmar Junta Declares Karenic Separatist Organization a Terrorist Group

Aug. 30, 2025

The military junta ruling Myanmar declared the Karen National Union (KNU) a terrorist organization in a statement earlier this week. The designation, while not surprising given the decades-long conflict between the KNU and the Tatmadaw, is another sign of the challenges facing the country as the junta prepares for elections later this year.

Many analysts, pointing to regions such as those controlled by the KNU, have concluded that the upcoming elections are a bid by the junta to develop a veneer of international legitimacy, despite being logistically and politically incapable of conducting a truly democratic process.

The junta controls only a small fraction of the country, disenfranchising opposition areas and making it impossible to conduct a representative poll.

Pointing to the broad international consensus on the illegitimacy of the junta's rule — it seized power from a democratically elected government in 2021 — a KNU spokesman indicated that the organization was not worried about the terrorist designation. "You don't even need to prove anything on who the real terrorists and international criminals are, and who the unlawful associations are," he said.

To read more persecution news from Myanmar and other regions, visit www.persecution.org

Tatmadaw Recaptures Key Town in Blow to Myanmar Freedom Fighters

July 24, 2025

After months of fighting, the military junta ruling Myanmar has captured Nawngkhio, a strategic town in northern Shan state, according to government and local sources.

Rebels seized Nawngkhio in late 2024 as part of an anti-junta offensive across multiple states. Another major city, Lashio, was similarly recaptured by junta forces in April. The junta's advance paves the way for further military operations in rebel-held territory. It has already led to waves of civilian arrests in the days following the fall of Nawngkhio.

According to data released this week by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, the regime has arrested 29,427 people since taking power in 2021 and killed 6,995 people, marking increases of about 50 prisoners and 60 killed in the last two weeks.

Myanmar Ceasefire Extended to End of June Despite Consistent Violations

June 6, 2025

The military junta ruling Myanmar announced this week that it would extend a temporary ceasefire, originally established in early April, to June 30. A massive earthquake struck the country in late March, killing at least 3,700 and necessitating extensive relief work in hard-hit civilian areas.

Opposition militias agreed to the extended ceasefire, creating hope for improved humanitarian conditions in June despite regular junta violations of the ceasefire up to now. In the first three weeks of the ceasefire alone, the U.N. tracked at least 172 junta attacks, including airstrikes and artillery assaults.

The acclaimed open-source research group Bellingcat documented that at least 22 villages were bombed by the junta in violation of the ceasefire agreement.

CITATIONS

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³ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/09/myanmar-facebook-systems-promoted-violence-against-rohingya-meta-owes-reparations-new-report/>

⁴ <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023-12/2023%20Anti-Conversion%20Laws%20Compendium.pdf#page=7>

⁵ <https://iimm.un.org/sites/default/files/2025/08/IIMM%20Annual%20Report%202025%20EN.pdf>

⁶ <https://ndburma.org/sex-based-violence/ort.pdf>

ICC AT WORK

- Bible translation and distribution through a partner.
- Aid for Christians in an IDP camp.
- Medical clinic for refugees who have fled to Thailand.
- Support for Rohingya refugees who have left Islam to follow Jesus.

REPORTS



Burma 2023 International Religious Freedom Report
United States Department of State



USCIRF Annual Report 2025 - Burma p. 20
United States Commission On International Religious Freedom

CONCLUSION

Myanmar remains deeply mired in persecution driven by military rule, Buddhist religious nationalism, and ethnic conflict. The overlap of religion and ethnicity means that ethnoreligious minorities such as the Rohingya, Chin, Karen, and Kachin are particularly vulnerable.

The military junta, under Min Aung Hlaing, continues to deploy air strikes, arrests, and torture, while political restructuring serves only to entrench its power and control over religious bodies and places of worship. Extremist non-state actors add to the environment of fear, often attacking religious minorities or punishing communities for perceived loyalties out of real or supposed political opposition.

Despite ceasefire declarations and formal steps toward elections, the reality for many Christians is increased displacement, reduced access to protection and aid, and grave human rights violations. Schools and religious buildings have been destroyed, religious leaders jailed, and families torn apart. The international community has documented these abuses and called for accountability. Yet comprehensive mechanisms for justice remain light, and impunity persists.

Without serious external pressure and internal reform, Myanmar's Christians will continue to bear the brunt of persecution, even as political change remains elusive. Attention should focus on ensuring protection of religious freedom in minority regions, documenting abuses for possible international legal accountability, enabling access to education and religious practice, and supporting internally displaced and refugee populations.

DESIGNATION

COUNTRY STATUS

SWL CPC

COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR CONCERN:

2023, 2024, 2025, 2026

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1 LEVEL 2 LEVEL 3 LEVEL 4

DO NOT TRAVEL to Burma for any reason due to armed conflict, civil unrest, arbitrary enforcement of local laws, poor health infrastructure, landmines and unexploded ordnance, and crime. (As of May 8, 2026)

BY THE NUMBERS

Between July 1, 2024, and July 1, 2025

38

CHRISTIANS KILLED

55

RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS DAMAGED

77

CHRISTIANS ARRESTED

33

CHRISTIANS ABDUCTED

680

ATTACKS ON HOUSES

1,993

INDIVIDUALS FORCED TO FLEE THEIR HOMES

International Christian Concern (ICC) partners with the International Institute for Religious Freedom to support its Violent Incidents Database. These figures represent only a small portion of the larger persecution picture.

NORTH KOREA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Ministry of State Security: The Ministry of State Security answers directly to North Korea's Supreme Leader, Kim Jong Un, and enforces the country's draconian legal system. Through its totalitarian control of ideology, legal instruments such as the so-called anti-reactionary thought law, extensive surveillance, forced labor camps, and extrajudicial punishment, it maintains a brutal system of religious repression.

The ministry runs a large network of political prisons where torture, forced labor, and other severe violations of human rights are commonplace.¹ While data is difficult to come by, analysts and the South Korean government estimate that between 80,000 and 120,000 people are imprisoned in North Korea under these horrific conditions.²

Workers' Party of Korea: The Workers' Party is North Korea's sole political party and the central ideological pillar of the Kim regime. Founded in 1949, it exerts total control over political, social, and religious life. The party enforces Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, elevating the Kim family to divine status while criminalizing dissent and contrary religious practice. Through extensive networks of local committees, security forces, and ideological indoctrination, the party monitors every aspect of citizens' lives. It directs propaganda, orchestrates purges, and sustains the system of political prison camps. For Christians, the Workers' Party is the ideological engine and administrative enforcer of persecution.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Kim Jong Un: As the Supreme Leader of North Korea, Kim remains the ultimate driver of persecution, demanding absolute loyalty from every corner of society. Under his rule, Christianity is considered an existential threat to the regime's legitimacy, and he has overseen intensification of surveillance, execution for "cultural crimes," and purges of officials accused of disloyalty.

The Kim family has ruled since the country's establishment in 1948, passing power down through successive generations and deepening the cult of personality around itself. Under the Kim family's rule, Christianity is brutally restricted. Even so much as owning a Bible, praying, or talking about one's faith can result in torture, imprisonment, or death. In place of religion, the regime demands fanatical devotion to the Kim family and the mythology it has created around itself. This political philosophy, which has taken on the unwieldy name Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, reigns supreme in the country and leaves absolutely no room for any free religious practice.

Kang Song Nam: Kang serves as director of the Prisons Bureau within North Korea's Ministry of State Security. Sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury, Kang is responsible for administering the DPRK's network of kwanliso — vast political prison camps where an estimated 80,000 to 120,000 people are incarcerated without trial.³ These facilities are infamous for forced labor, systematic starvation, torture, sexual violence, and executions.

The Prisons Bureau plays a central role in



QUICK FACTS

Region: East Asia

Population: 26.29 million

Religious Demography:

- 70% Atheist
- 17%-18% Shamanism and Unknown
- 11% Buddhist
- 1%-2% Christian*

Language: Korean

**Due to a near-complete lack of official demographic data from North Korea, these numbers are educated guesses based on several sources.*

the Kim regime's strategy of repression. Its function is not merely punitive but preventative — it is designed to eliminate potential threats by erasing entire families through guilt by association. Christians are particularly vulnerable. Believers discovered with Bibles or evidence of worship are branded enemies of the state, often disappearing into camps overseen by Kang's bureau. Though little is known of him personally, his bureaucratic authority makes him one of the regime's most dangerous persecutors.

“Centered around worship of the dynastic Kim family, North Korea has honed a national system of repression and violence designed to eliminate what it sees as the existential threat to its power posed by Christianity.”

—ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

Worship of the Kim family and complete loyalty to state ideology have subsumed all other forms of identity, at least in the eyes of the North Korean government. Nationalism is so extreme in North Korea that nonconformists are not merely viewed as inferior or pushed to the edges of society but systematically eliminated. Long prison sentences, forced labor or service to the government, and even executions are common tools in the government's arsenal as it enforces one of the world's strictest forms of nationalism.

EXTREMISM

While the government's total control of public and private life has reduced the number of forms of religious extremism seen in other parts of the world, it has replaced that form of extremism with another equally dangerous form. Children must report their parents to authorities at the slightest sign of religious interest or devotion, and, likewise, parents are forced to report their children for the same reasons. Family and community bonds often provide little safety, with members forced into extreme measures to prove their devotion to the regime.

POLITICS

No political pluralism of any kind exists. Dissent is treated as treason, and Christians are viewed as pawns of foreign powers by a regime that defines national unity as loyalty to the Kim dynasty and religion as an insidious outside influence. From the earliest stages of schooling, North Koreans undergo ideological, political, and religious indoctrination. Teachers insist on veneration for Kim Jong Il and his father, Kim Il-sung, and students learn that foreign religions are instruments of imperialism. Christians are stigmatized in educational settings, and even the descendants of known Christians may be penalized.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

Religious education is tightly restricted, especially for minors. Children younger than 18 are legally barred from entering religious venues or participating in worship, severing intergenerational faith traditions. State schools promote atheism and party loyalty, displacing religious instruction. While the five state-run religious institutions are allowed to operate schools, they are strictly prohibited from teaching religion as part of their curriculum. These educational barriers are designed to prevent cultural transmission and ensure that future generations identify more with CCP ideology than with faith.

SURVEILLANCE

A September 2025 U.N. report, based on interviews with more than 300 North Korean defectors, found that the government has increasingly turned to advanced technologies to monitor and control its citizens.⁴ Whether through technical surveillance or local informants, the government seeks to exert total control over its people through comprehensive data collection.

WOMEN

Female believers face compounded risk in North Korea. From being denounced by family members, they are then frequently subjected to sexual violence in detention for perceived ideological impurity. In these prisons and forced labor camps, women endure harsh conditions, torture, and abuse without recourse. Survivors tell of rape and of prison guards conducting crude abortion procedures on women — in some cases even making the women watch or participate in their child's death.



DESIGNATION

COUNTRY STATUS

SWL

CPC

COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR CONCERN: 2023-2026

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1

LEVEL 2

LEVEL 3

LEVEL 4

DO NOT TRAVEL to North Korea due to wrongful detention and other risks. *(As of April 29, 2025)*

ICC AT WORK

- We work with a partner to share the gospel through various means.
- We support the underground church and asylum seekers.

ICC NEWSROOM

North Korean Underground Church Leader Remembered for 'Character of Steel'

June 11, 2025

Kim Sung-sik was 49 years old when he was arrested in 2007 at his home in Gungsim-ri, Hoeryong City, North Korea, after he was caught distributing Bibles and Christian literature.

Communist authorities charged him with participating in a secret family-based Christian community and organizing an unauthorized religious association with anti-state intent — essentially leading an underground church.

Authorities had started to catch on to his subversive Christianity. In late December 2006, Bibles and other gifts were left at the houses of local families who were struggling in various ways. The Hoeryong City Counterintelligence Division accused Kim and his family of distributing these Bibles and gift bags and sentenced him to 11 months in prison.

South Korea Detains 6 Americans Sending Bibles into North Korea

June 27, 2025

South Korean authorities detained six Americans today after they attempted to send 1,600 plastic bottles containing miniature Bibles into North Korea by sea.

According to the Gwanghwa Island police, the Americans are being investigated because they allegedly violated the law on disaster management. The Americans reportedly threw the bottles, which also included USB sticks, money, and rice, into the sea, hoping North Koreans would eventually find them washed up on their shore. The police did not disclose the contents of the USB sticks.

Christian missionaries and human rights organizations have attempted to send plastic bottles by sea and balloons by air into North Korea. The bottles and balloons often contain a wide range of items, from Bibles to anti-North Korean propaganda and references to South Korean pop culture. South Korean authorities banned the sending of such items across the border from 2021 to 2023, fearing the items could cause tensions with the North to boil over.

South Korea's Constitutional Court dismissed a law that criminalized the practice of sending such items across the border, claiming it restricted free speech. President Lee Jae Myung, however, has pledged to halt such campaigns since taking office weeks ago, arguing that such items could provoke North Korea.

Christian Mother, Children Missing from North Korean Prison Since 2008

June 13, 2025

In North Korea, the presumption of "guilt by association" is applied in an extreme way. Shortly after Kim Sung-sik was arrested for distributing Bibles and leading a house church, authorities went after his family.

Kim's wife, Joo Chun-hee, 43, their son Kim Cheol, 16, and daughter Kim Hyang, 12, were arrested and charged with being involved in the underground house church activities that their husband and father led.

According to a testimony from a former officer with the local Ministry of State Security in Musan, after Kim Sung-sik was arrested, their home was bugged with surveillance equipment for six months.

North Korea: Where Christians are the Enemy of the State

Nov. 22, 2024

Though it maintains a small token church as a nod to its previously religious past, the North Korean government is no friend to religion.

Its despotic leader, Kim Jong Un, demands absolute loyalty to himself. In his calculus, any religious sentiment is proof of divided loyalties and cause for indefinite imprisonment, cruel torture, and even death.

Though the severity of the persecution makes a study of the North Korean church extremely difficult, escapees of the regime tell of a small but growing church body in the country worshipping quietly but faithfully.

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REPORTS



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*United States Commission
on International Religious
Freedom*



**North Korea 2023
International Religious
Freedom Report**
U.S. Department of State



LEGAL TAKE

By ICC Human Rights Counsel

Most modern communist countries, such as China and Vietnam, at least try to construct the illusion of complying with human rights norms. North Korea is one of those few nations that doesn't even pretend to.

For its refusal to abide by even the most basic international norms, especially human rights norms, and for the threat it poses to international security, North Korea is labeled a "rogue state." These countries are frequently hit with broad economic sanctions that cripple their economy, are subject to standing international warrants for their most egregious human rights violators, and face near-total isolation from the rest of the developed world.

Very few nations sink to the level of "rogue states" given the dire consequences of this label. But once a nation goes rogue, it has nothing to hold back its cruelty toward those it deems its domestic enemies. That is why rogue states are usually the most dangerous places in the world to be a Christian.



CONCLUSION

North Korea remains among the hardest persecutors of Christians and religious life in the world. The Kim regime operates a zero-tolerance policy against any belief system outside state ideology, viewing Christianity not as a faith but as a dangerous external subversion.

Under Kim Jong Un's leadership, repression has deepened, surveillance has grown more pervasive, penalties are more severe, and disappearances even more opaque.

At the same time, external voices are being silenced: media activities such as Free North Korea Radio's Kim Seong-min, whose death in 2025 marked a loss for information freedom, are among a few windows into the regime's abuses.⁵

Nonetheless, the clandestine church persists. Underground networks, though tiny, operate entirely in darkness, upheld by fellowship, radio broadcasts, smuggled materials, and courage.

Any external engagement — humanitarian, diplomatic, or technological — must reckon with the regime's ideological monolith and vulnerability of believers who live in total networks of defectors, expand documentation, and push for negotiated guarantees of religious dignity and safety for those already suffering. North Korea's many innocent civilians deserve no less.

VIETNAM

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Government Committee for Religious Affairs (GCRA): The GCRA is a tool for the government to control and co-opt religion nationwide.¹ The GCRA, created in the early 2000s to replace the Central Committee on Religion, has been granted a budget in the millions of U.S. dollars to control religious figures, regulate their worship, and ensure that religious groups' resources are used for the state.

The 2018 Law on Belief and Religion requires that religious groups in Vietnam must register with the GCRA to operate legally. Beyond simple registration to exist, these religious groups must gain approval for all religious activities each year. This blanket requirement gives the GCRA extremely wide latitude to prosecute unregistered religious groups and to micromanage the internal affairs of registered groups, who are required to regularly expose every detail of their internal decision-making to often hostile government authorities.

Local Officials: Much of the on-the-ground pressure comes from local officials enforcing state directives. Local officials enjoy wide-ranging discretion to enforce controls on religion and even detain congregants for gathering as part of disfavored religious groups. In Dak Lak province, local police visited pastors linked to the observance of religious

commemoration events. They instructed them to cease worship or join state-approved churches in an August 2025 crackdown that may have been linked to the International Day Commemorating Victims of Violence on Religion or Belief.²

At times, local officials harass churches in petty ways, even cutting off electricity to interrupt services. These officials also carry out land confiscation, social exclusion, and administrative harassment of religious minorities under the protection of national laws, which give them legal cover for the harassment and intimidation of religious minorities.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

To Lam: General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party, To Lam is a central figure in the nation's ideological antagonism toward Christianity and other disfavored religious institutions, formal and informal. Under his leadership, authorities have escalated pressure on Christian minorities — especially Montagnards and Hmong — citing “national unity” and “public security.” The central leadership continues to justify coercive religious controls under vague legal frameworks to clamp down on dissenting religious groups. While he is not always visible locally, his policy priorities give higher-level sanctions to persecution and suppression of autonomous religious life.

QUICK FACTS

Region: Southeast Asia

Population: 105.75 million

Religious Demography:

- 86% None
- 7% Christian
- 6% Buddhist
- 1% Other

Language:

- Vietnamese
- English



“Heavy government control of religious life creates an environment of fear and repression that severely limits many Christians and other unregistered religious groups.” —ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

NATIONALISM

Vietnamese nationalism emphasizes unity under one-party rule and suspicion of foreign-linked religious movements. Christian groups experience particular pressure, with ethnic minority Christians such as Montagnards and Hmong often finding themselves stigmatized as under the influence of foreign forces or undermining national cohesion. Under nationalist thought in Vietnam, communism rules as the supreme ideology, and any other loyalty is a direct threat to the state. In this worldview, Christianity is a threat to a unified communist national identity and therefore must be severely curtailed, when allowed at all.

POLITICS

Given the government's antagonism toward religion and its belief that communism should reign as the supreme ideology, religious leaders and activists who speak critically of government policy are vulnerable to criminal charges, surveillance, and detention. The combination of ideological control and political sensitivity means the line between religious and political dissent is thin, and religious groups without political ambitions at all are subject to intense political scrutiny by government officials eager to read political subversion into even purely religious stances.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

Arrests remain a central tool of Vietnam's religious repression in 2025. In January, Pastor Nguyen Manh Hung, 71, was detained under Article 117 for alleged anti-state propaganda, facing up to 20 years in prison.³ In August, police raided a Catholic home service in Binh Khang, cut electricity, and arrested three congregants without charge.⁴ Long-term prisoners such as Y Krec Bya continue to serve harsh sentences for undermining national solidarity.⁵ These arrests demonstrate how Vietnam criminalizes ordinary worship and conflates independent faith expression with political dissent.

SURVEILLANCE

Vietnamese authorities continued their intense surveillance of Christians in 2025, particularly in ethnic minority regions. In Dak Lak, pastors were summoned and interrogated about their participation in religious commemorations, with officials warning them against marking international days of religious freedom. Police regularly monitor house churches, photographing attendees and recording license plates to instill fear. Beyond in-country monitoring, state media exposed the personal addresses of staff at religious NGOs such as Boat People SOS, effectively doxxing them and endangering their families.⁶ This pervasive climate of surveillance undermines trust, pushes worship underground, and equates faith practice with political subversion.

WOMEN

Christian women in Vietnam's minority communities often face persecution on multiple fronts. In 2025, reports emerged of families expelling female converts from their villages, cutting them off from land rights, education, and social services. Women who persist in their faith are vulnerable to forced marriages or pressure to renounce Christianity to restore family honor. In rural areas, police interrogations are particularly traumatic for women, who may be targeted with threats of sexual violence. The state's restrictive approach compounds patriarchal cultural norms, leaving Christian women at the intersection of religious, gender, and ethnic discrimination.

STATE-CONTROLLED RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

Vietnam maintains a network of state-controlled religious bodies designed to absorb or replace independent faith communities. The government requires groups to register under the Law on Belief and Religion, forcing them into state-approved frameworks that compromise autonomy. Official churches, such as the state-recognized Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam, operate under close surveillance, with clergy pressured to align sermons with government messaging.⁷ Independent congregations that refuse registration face raids and harassment, while state institutions are used to legitimize restrictions. This dual system creates a façade of religious freedom while ensuring party dominance over faith.

ICC NEWSROOM

Thai Appeals Court Upholds Decision to Extradite Bdap to Vietnam Nov. 26, 2025

The Court of Appeals in Thailand upheld a lower court's verdict on Wednesday and ordered Y Quynh Bdap, a Christian activist and co-founder of Montagnards Stand for Justice (MSF), to be sent back to Vietnam from where he fled.

While Bdap lost his appeal in court this week, the Thai government may or may not extradite Bdap to Vietnam. The case is closely watched by U.S. officials, religious freedom advocates, and human rights groups.

A Thai court in Fall 2024 ordered Bdap, 32, to be extradited to Vietnam to face charges and a 10-year sentence for alleged terrorist and anti-Communist government activities tied to protests in June 2023 in Vietnam. The Vietnamese government made the unusual extradition request to Thai officials even though Bdap was not in Vietnam during the protests.

Christian Women Among Those Ordered to Meet with Officials in Vietnam Oct. 9, 2025

Montagnard Christian communities in Vietnam's Central Highlands are alarmed this week after at least six church members received orders to meet with government authorities on Wednesday.

While these orders are commonplace and an intimidation tactic for those who refuse to join government-endorsed "churches," four of the summonses were sent to women, which is unusual. Government officials usually target Christian men.

Vietnamese officials persecute Christians who worship apart from the state-approved churches that are hollow mouthpieces of the government. While Vietnam's socialist government lays the foundation, local officials can arbitrarily restrict worship and harm Christians, including abuse, intimidation, and harassment.

The government has long targeted ethnic minorities, including Christians of Montagnard and Hmong descent, for perceived political and religious threats. State-controlled religious groups give the government complete control over religious activities and pressure independent churches to join or risk punishment. Similar to China, state-sponsored churches in Vietnam pressure members to quasi-worship government leaders ahead of Christ.

Worship Service Stopped, 3 Arrested in Northeast Vietnam Aug. 14, 2025

As a priest quietly led a Catholic mass in the home of one of the 20 worshippers in the evening of Aug. 11 in Binh Khang, located in the Dai Tu district in northeast Vietnam, village authorities cut the home's electricity to stop the service. Then they detained three church members.

The three arrested included the owner of the house, the leader of the local Catholic community, and another church member.

Multiple worshippers turned to social media, particularly Facebook, to livestream the arrests. The footage was uploaded to the Bac Ninh Diocese's Facebook page, and within two hours, the videos had been shared hundreds of times and had gained more than 60,000 views.

Local officials have not given any reason as to why the mass was stopped or provided any update on the three worshippers who were arrested.

Vietnamese Government Lambasts ICC-Cosponsored Event in D.C. Feb. 19, 2025

Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security blasted Boat People SOS for participating in the International Religious Freedom Summit, an annual event cosponsored by Boat People SOS, International Christian Concern (ICC), and various other organizations from around the world.

The announcement called Boat People SOS a "terrorist organization" and publicized what it claimed was the residential and business address of persons associated with the organization to intimidate an organization that has long advocated for religious freedom in Vietnam.

In a separate announcement on its website, the Ministry of Public Security claimed that the IRF Summit "deliberately distorted and misrepresented" the truth to undermine Vietnam and suggested that the summit presents a security threat.

Summit partners, including ICC and Boat People SOS, have worked for years to raise awareness of the severe violations of religious freedom taking place in Vietnam and to respond to incidents of persecution — of which there are, unfortunately, many.

To read more persecution news from North Korea and other regions, visit www.persecution.org

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³ <https://www.rfa.org/english/vietnam/2025/01/31/protestant-religion-pastor-detained/>

⁴ <https://persecution.org/2025/08/14/worship-service-stopped-3-arrested-in-northeast-vietnam/>

⁵ <https://ishr.org/vietnam-steadfast-christian-sentenced-to-long-prison-term-for-the-second-time/>

⁶ <https://persecution.org/2025/02/19/vietnamese-government-lambasts-icc-cosponsored-event-in-d-c>

⁷ <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2024-09/2024%20USCIRF%20State%20Controlled%20Religion%20in%20Vietnam.pdf>

REPORTS



USCIRF Annual Report 2025 - North Korea p. 42

*United States Commission on
International Religious Freedom*



Vietnam 2023 International Religious Freedom Report

*United States Department
of State*



LEGAL TAKE By ICC Human Rights Counsel

Vietnam, like most other communist regimes, boasts that it does have religious freedom. And like other communist regimes, freedom is limited to worship in a place and manner strictly dictated by the state.

However, Vietnam has begun adopting a new tactic to oppress Vietnamese Christians, even those who had fled the country. In the country of Thailand, where thousands of Christian Vietnamese have fled, the government has attempted to bribe, threaten, and forcibly extradite Christians to Vietnam. Known as “refoulment” in international law, this tactic is a serious human rights violation that attempts to recapture Christians who have already risked their lives to escape the communist regime. Or so they thought.

Y Quynh Bdap is a Christian Montagnard activist and Vietnamese citizen who fled to Thailand after the Vietnamese government fabricated terror-related charges against him. On Nov. 26, 2025, Bdap lost his last appeal in Thailand to prevent being returned to Vietnam, where ICC regional staff predict “he will likely face torture, violence, and imprisonment ...”

ICC AT WORK

- Support for Hmong and Montagnard Christian refugees who live in Thailand and face discrimination and persecution.
- Aid for families of Hmong house church leaders.
- ICC worked with peer ministries on a session at the 2025 International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington, D.C., which addressed persecution of Montagnard Christians and other groups.
- Advocated for prisoners including Y Quynh Bdap, a Vietnamese Christian activist and co-founder of Montagnards Stand for Justice (MSF) who is detained in Thailand.

CONCLUSION

Vietnam continues to tighten its grip on religious life, particularly targeting house churches and ethnic minority Christian communities. While the government maintains a public posture of religious tolerance, key instruments of control — vague criminal laws, ideological oversight, and local coercion — are wielded to suppress independent worship.

While registered groups face myriad restrictions on their activities, unregistered groups experience an even more sinister type of repression backed by a legal framework that criminalizes their very existence. Leaders and members of these groups, including many protestant Christians, are subject to spurious legal charges, arrest, and even physical assaults. In some cases, authorities withhold critical identity paperwork such as birth certificates from members of

these unregistered groups, effectively rendering them stateless.

The arrests of Pastor Nguyen Manh Hung, disruptions of domestic mass gatherings, and intensified monitoring of Montagnard communities highlight that repression persists not only in remote areas but also threatens even marginal expressions of dissent.

For persecuted communities, the risks remain high. The interplay of nationalism, ideological control, and local pressure means that many believers must practice faith covertly or under threat of punishment.

Pressure from international bodies may help restrain abuses, but systemic change is unlikely as long as authoritarian rule views religious autonomy as a threat. The most vulnerable remain ethnic minority Christians who resist state-approved religious structures.

“Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”

—HEBREWS 13:3, 15-16 NIV

WHY NOW?

More than **388 million Christians** worldwide live under high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith.

That’s **1 in 7 believers globally** facing threats like imprisonment, loss of livelihood, displacement, violence, and even death simply because they follow Jesus.

WHAT’S NEXT?

At International Christian Concern, we believe God has called us to an audacious goal: to holistically serve 10 million persecuted Christians during the next decade on our way to serving every persecuted believer in need.

We pray that they not only survive persecution, but thrive as a bold witness for Christ.

BY THE NUMBERS

2.6
BILLION

Christians
Worldwide

380+
MILLION

Christians Face
Persecution

10
MILLION

Persecuted
Christians Served in
the Next 10 Years

\$300

Holistically Serves
a Persecuted
Family of Four



WHAT WE DO



We Aid

We give hope and ease the suffering of persecuted believers, communities, and churches by rebuilding lives and equipping the church in the most hostile places.



We Awaken

We awaken the Western church to the suffering of persecuted Christians through engaging content that stirs hearts to prayer and action.



We Advocate

We counter Christian persecution by informing policymakers, fighting for justice to free prisoners, and holding regimes accountable.

OUR SOLUTION > Through our faithful donors, we can support global projects through our five funds.

WHERE MOST NEEDED FUND

As a ministry, we must act quickly to help our persecuted brothers and sisters. Where Most Needed supports all areas of our ministry. This fund is the most versatile and enables us to move quickly and adapt to changes in giving levels and project needs.

EMERGENCY RELIEF FUND

Many Christians are in peril, desperate to be rescued from their oppressors. They may have left everything behind as they fled their attackers. Or an imprisoned pastor's family needs financial support. We meet believers in their time of greatest need.

GOSPEL FUND

The Gospel is the hope of the persecuted and the answer to a hurting world. Through church planting, discipleship, Persecution Readiness Training, and trauma care, we equip believers to stand firm in faith and share Christ in the world's most difficult places.

COMMUNITY DEV. FUND

Through our Community Development Fund, we supply persecuted Christians with necessities after an attack, yet we must ensure that they thrive long-term. From setting up small businesses for converts who've been exiled to large scale communal farms, we are there long after the dust settles.

EDUCATION FUND

Children who are better educated are less likely to be targeted for persecution. Students are thriving in our Bible-focused Hope House schools in every region we operate in. As they get older, they pursue a trade or college degree through our Generation Transformation program.

To learn more about ICC's Funds and ways to support our ministry, visit www.persecution.org/give



Equipping the Church on the Frontlines of Faith

We come alongside persecuted believers in their time of greatest need, restoring dignity and equipping Christian leaders to spread the gospel in dangerous places.

This God-honoring work is possible only through your faithful support and our trusted partners on the ground.



*"IF ONE PART SUFFERS, EVERY
PART SUFFERS WITH IT; IF
ONE PART IS HONORED, EVERY
PART REJOICES WITH IT."*

1 CORINTHIANS 12:26

Each year, an estimated 380 million Christians around the world are persecuted because of their faith in Jesus. Our brothers and sisters in Christ are beaten, imprisoned, and even killed for their faith. In many countries, it is illegal for them to share the gospel.

We must stand with them.

Give Online

www.persecution.org/give

Give by Phone

1-800-422-5441

Contact Us

icc@persecution.org

Give by Mail

International Christian Concern
P.O. Box 268804
Oklahoma City, OK 73126-8804

OUR MISSION: Since 1995, ICC has served the global persecuted church through a three-pronged approach of advocacy, awareness, and assistance. ICC exists to ease the suffering of Christians in hostile places and aid, support, and empower them as they boldly live out their faith.

DONATIONS: International Christian Concern (ICC) is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) (all donations tax-deductible). ICC makes every effort to honor donor wishes in regards to their gifts. Occasionally, a situation will arise where a project is no longer viable. ICC will redirect those donated funds to one of our other funds that is most similar to the donor's original wishes.



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