

GLOBAL PERSECUTION INDEX

- 2025 -

PERSECUTION.ORG



SHINING A LIGHT ON RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

Raising awareness and educating the world about religious persecution is crucial to ensuring all mankind can enjoy the fundamental right of religious freedom. Far too many people are either uninformed or misinformed regarding the scale and severity of persecution around the globe.

By shedding light on these stories — whether it's believers in Iraq who bore the brunt of the ISIS onslaught or the Christians facing persecution under Chinese rule — International Christian Concern (ICC) helps galvanize support for those who suffer for their faith.

The defense of religious freedom is not just a policy objective; it is a moral imperative. We must work together to ensure religious freedom for everyone, everywhere, all the time. I'm glad ICC is in the fight.

Sam Brownback

Co-Chair, International Religious Freedom Summit Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom (2018-2021)

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LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

WORST OF THE WORST: ANNUAL REPORT ON GLOBAL CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION

2024 was a harrowing year for massive numbers of Christians worldwide. From underground house churches in China to remote villages in Nigeria, the Body of Christ has faced relentless persecution from governments, terrorist organizations, and society. As we release our annual Global Persecution Index, my heart is heavy after reading about the realities that Christians face around the world. Yet, I am also reminded of the profound hope and resilience displayed by our brothers and sisters in Christ under unimaginable circumstances.

This report is more than a list; it is a testament to the endurance of the persecuted church and a clarion call for the global church to act. It highlights the most egregious violators of religious freedom in 2024, cataloging the countries, terrorist organizations, and government leaders whose actions have systematically targeted Christians.

A Call to Action

The details of persecution you will read in our report are not isolated incidents. They represent the lived-out reality of millions of Christians worldwide who face daily threats to their lives and religious freedom.

At International Christian Concern, we are committed to advocating for their rights, amplifying their voices, and providing practical care for them.

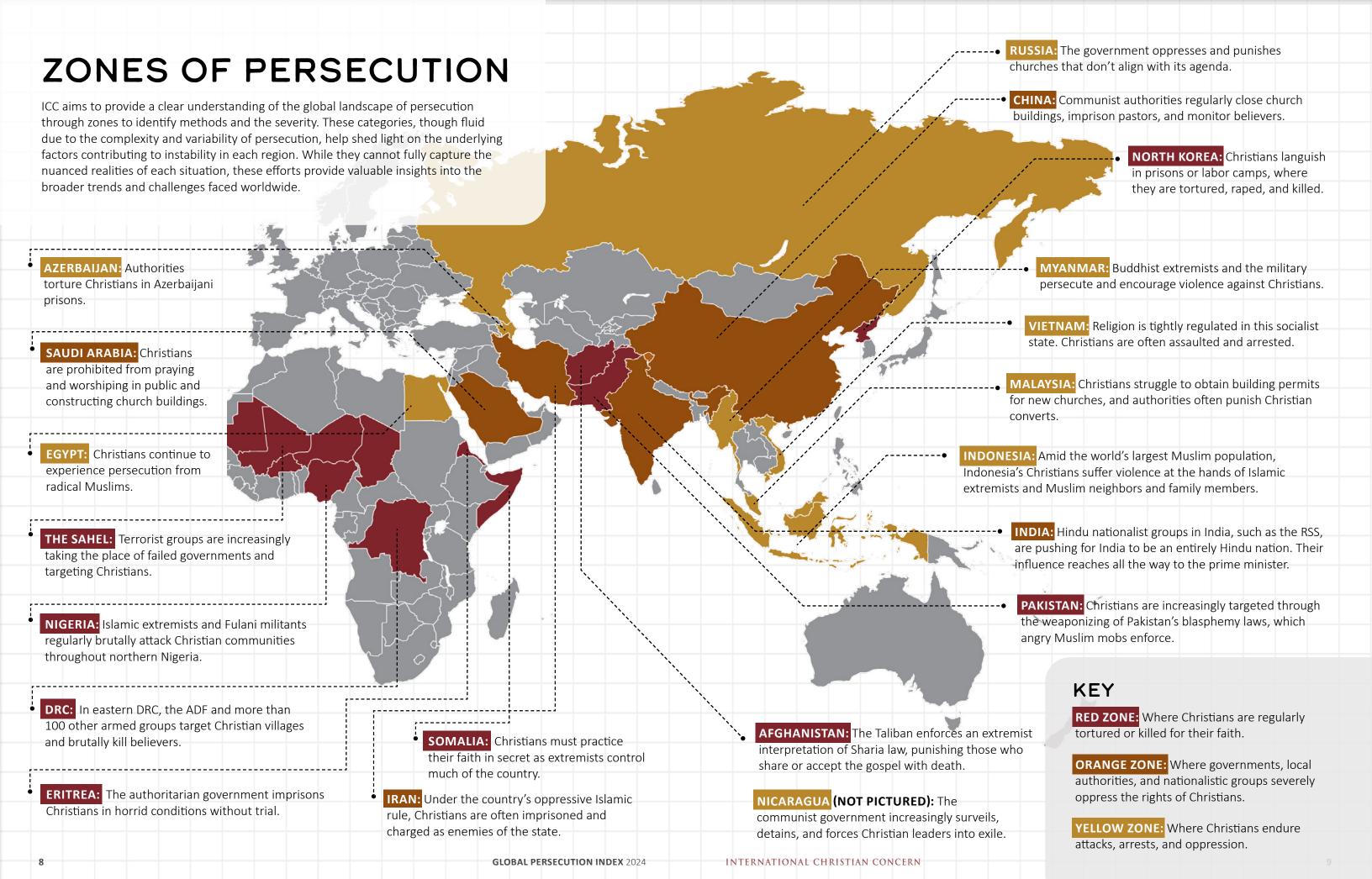
I invite you to join us in prayer, advocacy, and action on their behalf and to remember the words of Tertullian, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

While the adversaries of faith seek to extinguish the Church, they only spread its flame.

Jeff King, President
International Christian Concern | Persecution.org









AUTHORITARIANISM

Around the world, authoritarian regimes are growing in their conviction that the free exercise of religion is a mortal enemy to their grip on power. From China, which has refined and exported this belief around the world, to Nicaragua, where the Catholic church is viewed as a political enemy of the state, dictators everywhere appear to be increasing their focus on controlling religion or eliminating Christianity altogether.

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

In many countries, persecution is exacerbated by factors such as politics, economics, and historical animosity along ethnic or geographic lines. The conflict in Sudan, which has led to attacks on at least 165 churches, is a political one, but has deeply affected religious practice. China and Myanmar's genocides against the Uyghur and Rohingya people are motivated not just by religious hatred but by ethnic hatred as well. Azerbaijan's territorial claims over parts of Armenia have led to the destruction of dozens of Christian heritage sites. As bad actors around the world commit their acts of violence, they often lash out against Christians and vulnerable religious minorities.

GLOBAL SHIFT IN TERRORISM

When the Islamic State lost the last of its territory in 2019, many believed that the group had been defeated. It did not take long, however, to see that it had merely shifted tactics, following the broader trend of terrorism to Africa, where it is growing rapidly. Today, nearly half of global deaths to terrorism happen in Africa, driven by affiliates of global terror groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaida and local groups like Somalia's al-Shabab and Nigeria's Boko Haram. While the groups do sometimes fight each other for territory, their combined attacks on Christian communities are consistent and devastating.

GROWTH IN THE FACE OF PERSECUTION

While persecutors hope their actions will eliminate disfavored religions, or at least stop their growth, the opposite is often true. Christianity is the fastest growing religion in Asia and seems to be flourishing, in a sense, even in areas where despotic rulers are working relentlessly to eliminate it. In the clerical Islamic theocracy of Iran, Christianity is growing at such a rate that some estimate the Iranian church may be the fastest growing church in the world. While increased numbers in the persecuted church does not equate to health or thriving, the failure of persecutors to extinguish Christianity is a testament to the faithfulness of these believers and evidence of God's ongoing work to expand his kingdom.

MASS DISPLACEMENT

Conflicts influencing or stemming from religion are continuing to displace millions. In Sudan, 2024's worst humanitarian disaster by the numbers, the warring sides have targeted religious sites, clergy, and congregants and have displaced more than 12 million civilians since the conflict began in April 2023. Myanmar's ruling military junta has continued its attacks on the homes and villages of various ethnoreligious minorities, displacing about 2.3 million people since seizing the country in 2021. And more than 100,000 Armenian Christians had to flee disputed Artsakh as Azerbaijan took full control.

POPULAR DISCONTENT WITH REPRESSION

As powerful as the global movement toward authoritarianism, religious nationalism, and repression may be, its ultimate victory is far from assured. Voters in India's 2024 general election handed the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) a real electoral setback, forcing it to join a governing coalition with secular parties. In Myanmar, the junta's violence has coalesced the country's many ethnoreligious minorities, who chalked up many impressive military victories against the junta in 2024. Iran faces the constant threat of mass uprising, the result of an overzealous enforcement of Islamic morality law. In these countries and others, persecutors are realizing the limits of their ability to restrict religion.

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

Most glaring in Asia, the rise of religious nationalism has come to affect millions of religious minorities today. In Myanmar, religious nationalism inspires the ruling military junta to bomb ethnoreligious minorities in their homes. In India and Pakistan, religious nationalism prompts mobs to attack peaceful worship services and lynch those accused of violating Hindu or Muslim moral codes (dozens of Christian homes and churches were destroyed by an angry mob in Jaranwala, Pakistan, in August 2023). A convenient tool for politicians who happily trade on religious stereotypes to rile up their voters, religious nationalism has become an international threat to religious freedom.

RESTRICTIONS ON WOMEN

While persecution affects Christians of every age and gender, women are often singled out for particularly restrictive regulations. Since taking power in 2021, Afghanistan's ruling Taliban government has imposed its extremist interpretation of Islam on every corner of society. Nowhere has this been clearer than in its treatment of women, with most the Taliban's religious edicts since 2021 focused on restricting their place in society and ensuring that they abide by the strictest interpretations of Islamic law. Similar patterns can be seen elsewhere, including in Iran and Egypt where Christian women occupy the bottom rungs of society.

TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

Not content with persecuting Christians within their borders, many of the world's most restrictive governments are ramping up efforts to pursue dissidents and religious minorities in other countries. Azerbaijan's military conquests in neighboring Armenia, Turkish repression of religious minorities in northern Syria, and Nicaragua's attacks on family members of exiled priests highlight the growth of transnational repression and stand as a sobering reminder that persecution is a global issue — not a problem that stays neatly in faraway corners of the world.

USE OF TECHNOLOGY

With the rise of artificial intelligence, cheap technology, and economic partnerships among the world's more repressive regimes has come an increase in the use of technology to monitor and restrict religious minorities. China has grown as a central figure in this movement, exporting surveillance hardware and software to its client states in Africa and Latin America and its partners in the Middle East.



ISSUES AND TRENDS IN AFRICA

Africa. Introduced to northern Africa by the apostle Mark in the first century, Christianity spread southward in the following decades, finding a foothold in Ethiopia — one of the first Christian nations in the world — and continuing to spread across the continent even before the arrival of Europeans in 1497.

Today, most of Africa's population considers itself Christian, and the continent has more self-identifying Christians than any other continent.

share of persecution. From Islamic conquests in the early days of Christianity to the modern-day rise of terrorism, Africa's Christian communities have faced severe danger for their faith.

MODERN-DAY PERSECUTION IN AFRICA

In recent years, Africa has become the global hotbed of terrorism. Nearly half of deaths by extremists globally happen in Africa, highlighting the shifting priorities of groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaida, which originated in the Middle East but, in recent years, have turned their focus to sub-Saharan Africa. Locally grown terrorist organizations like Nigeria's thousands and displacing many more since their founding. Tens of thousands of Christians have been killed and displaced by radicalized Fulani militants in Nigeria's Middle Belt.

region, including in predominantly Christian countries like the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where the jihadist Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) have grown into effective fighting forces, interreligious violence is particularly intense in the Sahel region, where the Muslim-majority north and Christian-majority south meet.

THE FUEL FOR RADICALIZATION

radicalization and religious extremism. Mass discontent with the status quo and the need to protect resources from competing groups have led to significant violence. Clashes over resources like land and water metastasize into religious conflicts, with religious leaders, churches, and communities attacked and sometimes massacred. Religious animosity is now a driving factor in many conflicts and must be addressed for peace and cooperation to return.

In this difficult socioeconomic context, the Islamic State and al-Qaida have managed to wrest significant swaths of territory

y many measures, Christianity is thriving in sub-Saharan from government control. While both groups engage in brutal violence against Christian communities and others who stand in the way of their Islamic caliphates, they have also begun to provide citizens with basic services like schooling, improved roads, and a form of security.

> This effort to win over the local population has proven widely successful, with local communities providing the terrorist groups with concealment and a supply of fighters in exchange for these basic services.

Effective as this approach is, it should be noted that not every Still, Christianity's growth in Africa has not come without its group uses these methods. Boko Haram, founded in Nigeria, is notable for its indiscriminate violence against all who do not support its efforts, Christian and Muslim alike. While it prioritizes attacks on Christians first, the group also views moderate Muslims as enemies. It targets them with such viciousness that even the Islamic State was forced to sever ties with Boko Haram in 2016.

GOVERNMENT AND REGIONAL RESPONSES

Governments in the region, including Nigeria, Niger, and Chad, have so far failed to counter the terrorist threat in the region. In fact, internecine strife between Boko Haram and the Islamic Boko Haram and Somalia's al-Shabab also wreak havoc, killing State has caused more damage to the groups than all the efforts of the U.S.-supported government task forces combined in the last two years, according to the International Crisis Group.

In some areas, free religious expression is hindered by conflict Though the threat of terrorism is present throughout the other than terrorism. Sudan, for example, is amid a brutal civil war in which both sides have attacked religious sites, killed religious leaders, and disrupted religious practices across the country. Estimates suggest that about 8.2 million civilians have been displaced since fighting between the groups started in April 2023, including Christian minorities, who have long struggled to survive in the country.

RELIGION'S ROLE IN AFRICAN CONFLICTS

Extreme poverty has plagued the Sahel for decades, fueling As Africa grapples with the many fault lines causing tension across the continent, it would be well to consider the role religion has played in violence across the continent. While some conflicts find their roots beyond religion — many are based on ethnic tension or are focused on the distribution of limited resources — deep religious divides between communities continue to play a central role. In the case of the Islamic State, al-Qaida, and other terrorist groups, religious extremism plays the significant role. In either case, policymakers cannot afford to ignore the way that religious identity continues to shape the motivations and goals of combatants across Africa.

KEY CHALLENGES

TERRORISM AND EXTREMISM

Groups like Boko Haram, al-Shabab, and the Islamic State have targeted Christians.

INTER-RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

Tensions between Muslim and Christian communities, particularly in the Sahel region, have led to violent

GOVERNMENT PERSECUTION

Countries like Eritrea and Somalia have imposed severe restrictions on religious freedom, including imprisonment and torture.

RADICALIZATION

Poverty, political instability, and social grievances have fueled the rise of radical ideologies that often target religious minorities.

WAYS TO RESPOND

STRENGTHEN RELIGIOUS FREEDOM LAWS

Enact and enforce laws that protect the rights of all religious groups.

PROMOTE INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Encourage understanding and cooperation between different religious communities.

INCREASE INTERNATIONAL **PRESSURE**

Urge governments to address religious persecution and hold perpetrators accountable.

ADDRESS ROOT CAUSES

Combat poverty, inequality, and political instability to prevent the spread of extremism.



AREA OF FOCUS

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

The ADF, an extremist group with ties to the Islamic State, has carried out attacks on Christian communities.

ERITREA

A repressive regime has subjected Christians and other religious minorities to severe persecution, including imprisonment and forced conscription.

NIGERIA

Boko Haram and other extremist groups have targeted Christians, particularly in the north and middle belt regions.

SOMALIA

Al-Shabab, an al-Qaida affiliate, has imposed a strict interpretation of Sharia law, severely restricting religious freedom for Christians.

THE SAHEL

The Sahel region, plagued by climate change, poverty, and political instability, faces a growing humanitarian crisis as millions are displaced and food insecurity worsens.

For a full list and explanations of persecution zones, visit page 8.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Allied Democratic Forces (ADF): Also known as the Islamic State Central Africa Province following a reported 2019 merger with the global Islamic State movement, the ADF is among the most dangerous militant movements in the DRC today. It also has the clearest ties to an extremist jihadist ideology and is the deadliest militant group in the country, with more than 1,000 deaths in 2023. While the DRC's Christian-majority population means that some attacks on Christians may be unmotivated by religion, the ADF is known to target churches and church leaders.

March 23 Movement (M23): M23 has caused widespread violence and destruction in the DRC since its creation in 2012. Stemming from the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide and comprised primarily of ethnic Tutsis, the group's motivations seem to be largely political and ethnic rather than religious. Still, the violence perpetrated by the group, which is backed by the Rwandan government, severely affects religious freedom in the DRC and has contributed to the displacement of millions of people.²

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Musa Baluku: After the capture of ADF leader Jamil Mukulu in 2015, Musa Baluku rose from the ranks of senior leadership to take his place. Previously the chief Islamic judge in the militia's Sharia court, he has deepened the ADF's commitment to radical Islamist ideology since his ascension to power. Baluku is known as a vicious and violent man, personally overseeing beheadings, crucifixions, and other executions.³

As part of the ADF's shift toward radical Islam, Baluku declared in 2020 that the group had been absorbed into the global Islamic State conglomerate, though analysts are still unclear as to the extent of this absorption. Some believe that the connection to the Islamic State has been exaggerated for recruiting or other purposes. Others believe that the ADF splintered, with one group joining the Islamic State and the other operating independently. Regardless of the ADF's organizational structure, Baluku's leadership has caused great destruction in the DRC and led to the targeting of many innocent Christians for their faith.



"REGIONAL INSTABILITY HAS MADE THE DRC A FERTILE BREEDING GROUND FOR TERRORIST EXTREMISM AND MILITANT VIOLENCE."

-ICC STAFFER

STATE DEPARTMENT STATUS

COUNTRY STATUS

TRAVEL ADVISORY

SW

CPC

LEVEL 1 LEVEL 2 LEVEL 3

LEVE

NONE

RECONSIDER TRAVEL to the Democratic Republic of the Congo due to crime and civil unrest. Some areas have increased risk. (State Department, as of July 9, 2024)

PERSECUTION MEASURES

RADICAL ISLAM & EXTREMISM

Analysts say that the role of jihadism and radical Islam in the DRC has grown since the 2015 arrest of ADF leader Jamil Mukulu.⁴ In 2019, the Islamic State claimed credit for a presumed ADF attack, and in 2020, ADF leader Musa Baluku published a video in which he claimed to have dissolved the ADF into the global Islamic State structure.⁵

Photos and videos from inside ADF camps support the idea that it has taken on an increasingly hardline Islamist identity, with the group enforcing its version of Sharia law on members.⁶ Evidence also suggests that the group has focused its efforts on attacking the many non-Muslim civilians in its areas of operation.⁷

POLITICS

Much of the violence in the DRC has its roots in political conflict, including animosity created by the Rwandan genocide of the 1990s. M23, for example, is mostly made up of people from the Tutsi ethnic group and purports to protect the interests of that group, which suffered greatly during the Rwandan genocide.

Response to armed conflict in the DRC has also been hampered by regional political disputes, with Rwanda supporting M23 against the Congolese government. Felix Tshisekedi, president of the DRC, has also complicated matters by demanding U.N. peacekeepers leave the country. The U.N.'s drawdown throughout 2024 fueled continued violence.

REFUGEES & IDP CAMPS

While estimates vary, reports from the U.N. suggest that roughly 7 million civilians have been displaced by ongoing violence in the DRC. A 2024 report from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, a U.N. body, found that 358,000 people were displaced in January 2024 alone, bringing the total to 7.1 million. About 80% of the displaced were uprooted because of some armed conflict.⁸ Most of the displacement occurred in the northeast, where the ADF and M23 operate.

As the U.N. continues to draw down its peacekeeping force, the future of refugees in the DRC is uncertain. Rebel militias have already advanced toward areas such as Goma, with high concentrations of displaced people, putting them at risk of repeated violence and displacement.

ICC @ WORK

ICC is committed to emergency relief aid and community development work for ADF victims in the DRC — including families that have been traumatized by terrorist attacks and lost husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, and children. ICC is standing with them and helping them rebuild their lives with dignity.

Islamic Rebels Kill More than 30 Christians in Eastern DRC Aug. 12, 2024

The remains of more than 30 people were found on July 24 following yet another brutal attack on a Christian community by Islamic extremist Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in Eastern Congo.

The bodies, many of which had been decapitated, were discovered in the Batangi-Mbau area of the Beni territory in North Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

Léon Siviwe, chief of Beni-Mbau, said the attack was part of a week marked by escalating violence. The victims were primarily from several villages within the Babila-Bakaiku locality, including Kotanarespe, Nakota, Musangwa, and Akwekwe.

Bombs Kill 18 at Displacement Camps in the DRC May 13, 2024

Earlier this month, rebel groups attacked two camps for internally displaced people in the northeast province of Kivu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The U.N. reported that the bomb killed at least 18 people and injured 32 others. Most of the victims were women and children.

More than 100 armed groups are active in the DRC's northeastern region, fighting for land, control of mines, or trying to protect communities. These groups often target Christians. Various conflicts conducted by these groups have displaced nearly 7 million people, thousands of whom currently reside in temporary camps

In their response to these attacks, the U.N. called the violence a "flagrant violation of human rights and international humanitarian law and may constitute a war crime." According to international law, specifically the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998), "Once persons have been displaced, they retain a broad range of economic, social-cultural, civil and political rights including ... the right to be protected from physical violence."

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

Hunger, Malnutrition, and Violence Haunt the DRC March 28, 2024

U.N. statistics show that 23.4 million — one in four — Congolese face hunger and malnutrition. That makes the central African country the worst affected by food insecurity in the world today. About 120 armed groups are fighting for ascendancy, with some motivated by Islamist extremism and violence focused near the country's eastern border with Uganda and Rwanda.

About 7.1 million people are currently displaced in the DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo). That number has grown by 800,000 since the beginning of this year. Much of the violence is happening in North Kivu and Ituri provinces, where the M23 rebel group has surged in activity in recent months. The Islamist group ADF (Allied Democratic Forces) has been particularly active on the border between the two provinces, according to U.N. Special Representative Bintou Keita who heads the U.N. mission to DRC.

"All foreign forces illegally operating on DRC's territory need to withdraw," Keita said in a briefing to the U.N. Security Council this week "and national and foreign armed groups, such as the ADF and FDLR, need to be disarmed."

M23 Rebel Group Gains Ground in DRC as U.N. Forces Withdraw March 8, 2024

More than 100,000 civilians were forced to flee their homes this week after two days of fierce fighting in eastern DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo that saw the fall of Nyanzale town to M23, a terror organization, according to a U.N. statement. Located in North Kivu province, Nyanzale is only 81 miles from Goma, the capital and largest city in the province and a strategic military prize currently controlled by Congolese forces.

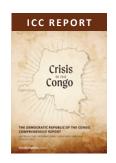
Over a dozen civilians, including children, were killed in this week's attacks in Nyanzale, according to officials cited in the media. Though precise numbers are difficult to obtain, experts estimate that about 6 million have died in the armed conflict since 1996.

ADF Militants Attack Village Midday, Kill at Least 7 People April 3, 2024

At least seven people were killed on Tuesday, April 2, as members of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) carried out a midday attack on the village of Mangodomu, located in Mangina, Beni territory, in DRC's North Kivu province.

Nicaise Kyora, president of the youth parliament of Mangina, confirmed the deaths, adding that others were taken hostage, and the local Christian health center had been looted and set on fire.

REPORTS



Crisis in the Congo

ICC's Democratic Republic of the Congo Comprehensive Report



State Department

2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Democratic Republic of the Congo



An unpaved road in rural DRC provides a conduit of opportunity for trade between villages.

iStock / quenterquni

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Extreme poverty is a widespread phenomenon in the DRC. About 7 million people are internally displaced in the country, with more than 1 million refugees spread out in neighboring countries. Malnourishment is rampant, with a median age of 16.7 — one of the lowest in the world. Just 2.49% of the population lives to the age of 65.

As in many parts of the world, Islamist terrorist organizations like the ADF in the DRC exploit desperation and poverty as a recruiting tactic. While its tactics and ideologies have shifted throughout the decades since its founding, the ADF is primarily marked today by Islamist extremism — unwelcome news for Christians in the DRC and neighboring Uganda and nearby Mozambique, where it also operates.

While the international community recognizes the extreme danger posed by terrorism in the DRC, 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, the world must recognize the persecution happening and address it accordingly. Only then can a workable solution be reached.

CITATIONS

- ¹ https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2024/drc/
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- 3 https://insidetheadf.org/leadership-adf-bios/
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ERITREA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ): Despite early pledges of support for democracy, human rights, and economic freedom, the PFDJ has emerged as Eritrea's sole political party and a violent enemy of political dissent. Chaired by the country's president, Isaias Afwerki, the PFDJ today represents a radical left-leaning nationalist ideology that is completely closed to civil liberties and political rights.

Eritrean Ministry of Defense: In addition to its military duties, the Ministry of Defense runs a judiciary responsible for trying corruption and national security cases. Eritrea's broad definition of national security gives these military courts jurisdiction to prosecute a wide variety of cases, including against religious minorities for their beliefs. Judges within this system double as prosecutors for their own cases, adding another layer of injustice to a system that does not allow those convicted to appeal.¹

Ministry of Justice: The Ministry of Justice runs similarly to the Ministry of Defense, with the Ministry of Justice overseeing prisons and jails administered by the domestic police force. Research has yet to show the exact extent of the penal system operated by the Ministry of Justice, but reports show the existence of many secret facilities in addition to those that are publicly acknowledged.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Isaias Afwerki: After 25 years of guerrilla fighting in Eritrea's long war for independence from Ethiopia, Afwerki took control of the country in the early 1990s and has not relinquished it since. He serves as president and chairman of the PFDJ, the country's only political party. Afwerki's rule has been marked by extreme authoritarianism and widespread violence toward political dissidents and religious minorities.

The Eritrean government shuttered all independent media in 2001, cutting its citizens off from access to outside information and helping it to exert total control over the populace.² President Afwerki has not allowed a national election since coming to power, though some local elections have taken place under the careful supervision and control of the ruling party.



"NICKNAMED THE NORTH KOREA OF AFRICA, ERITREA HAS LONG BEEN RULED BY A DESPOTIC LEADER DETERMINED TO **ERADICATE HUMAN RIGHTS FROM** WITHIN HIS BORDERS."

-ICC STAFFER

STATE DEPARTMENT STATUS

COUNTRY STATUS

TRAVEL ADVISORY

CPC

LEVEL 1 LEVEL 2 LEVEL 3 LEVEL 4

2024 & 2023 CPC

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

PERSECUTION MEASURES

POLITICS

A Christian-majority nation, persecution in Eritrea is largely driven by political extremism. Ideologically, Eritrea follows many of the patterns seen in Communist China. President Afwerki even traveled to China in the 1960s to study Maoism, returning inspired and ready to implement Maoist policies in his country. Eritrea remains close to China to this day, particularly since the rise of Xi Jinping, whose leadership style is strikingly similar to Mao's.3

Those who dare cross the government are swiftly punished, with many Christians and other persons of conscience thrown in prison for standing by their faith in the face of government persecution. Survivors of these prisons report regular beatings, severe torture, and degrading conditions in the overcrowded facilities.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

Lawbreakers find themselves detained in some of the most inhumane conditions in the world. Reports from Eritrean prisons run by the Ministries of Justice and Defense, which hold many prisoners of conscience, report torture, food deprivation, and inmates crammed into shipping containers in the desert. For many imprisoned believers, there is no earthly escape.

Completing the judicial system's lack of justice and accountability, those convicted in military courts are often sentenced to long periods of time in a network of military-run prisons where conditions are inhumane, and torture regularly occurs. While much of how these prisons run is unknown, survivors paint a grim picture of life within.

STATE CONTROL

Unlike many countries that persecute Christians, Eritrea has a significant Christian population. The government even grants official recognition to three separate Christian groups — the Orthodox Tewahedo Church, the Catholic Church, and the Lutheran Church — estimated to make up 49% to 63% of the total population and one Muslim group.

However, the considerable number of religious adherents does not protect Christians, Muslims, or other believers from government repression. Officials enforce the narrow bounds of state-approved worship with severe penalties, including torture, imprisonment, and even death. Those who dare step outside those confines are dealt with swiftly, often in a penal system known for its inhumane treatment of prisoners.

ICC @ WORK

ICC provides emergency relief to Christians who have fled their homes due to persecution. We also provide audio Bibles and other Christian literature to Eritrean Christians. Through our Prison Letter Writing Campaign, ICC supporters send letters of encouragement to our brothers and sisters imprisoned in Eritrea. ICC's advocacy team released "Eritrea: The North Korea of Africa," a report that highlights the dangerous reality for Christians living in Eritrea.

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

This week, 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."

Christians Suffer in Africa's 'North Korea' Prisons Jan. 22, 2024

Called "Africa's North Korea" by some, Eritrea is ruled by an oppressive, totalitarian government that is openly hostile to religion. Although Eritrea is roughly split between Christians and Muslims, the government, led by the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), under Isais Afwerki, has consistently restricted religious practice.

There are an estimated 400 to 500 Christian prisoners of faith in the country, none of whom have received a trial or even been charged with a crime. Religious prisoners are often subjected to long or indefinite terms in prisons where they suffer unimaginably inhumane conditions.

"The world needs to wake up to the atrocities taking place in Eritrea today," ICC's Africa Regional Director said. "Not only are Christians imprisoned, tortured, and killed, but the everyday person lives under the oppression of an authoritative regime, dictated by Isaias Afwerki, a ruthless leader with a totalitarian agenda."

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

103 Christian College Students Imprisoned in Eritrea April 25, 2023

Earlier this month, Eritrean police raided a group of Christian college students who had gathered to worship and record video clips for social media.

Release International reported that 103 Christians, mainly students, were arrested in the crackdown. The raid took place in the capital, Asmara, and those arrested were taken to Mai Serwa prison. There are now more than 500 Christian prisoners detained indefinitely without trial in Eritrea. The prison where the students were taken, Mai Serwa, is notorious for its harsh conditions, overcrowding, and poor treatment of inmates. Many prisoners there were imprisoned for political reasons.

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," the grieving father cried.

Unfortunately, this story is all too common for Christians living in Africa's most repressive country. While no one knows the exact number of believers living in Eritrea, one thing is known for certain: they are among the most persecuted on the planet.

Eritrean Government Takes Over Religious College Sept. 3, 2022

The government of Eritrea has taken over a Catholic-run technical college, according to the BBC. To support this encroachment, Eritrea cites a 1995 regulation giving it authority over religious institutions in the country.

Known as the worst governmental violator of religious freedom in Africa, Eritrea has seized other Catholic-run educational institutions in the past, including a number of religious secondary schools and healthcare facilities.



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

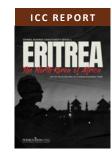
Proclamation 73 of 1995, the country's central regulation for religious groups, establishes an Office of Religious Affairs and creates a strict framework for groups that limits their ability to work with foreign organizations and restricts the kinds of social activities they can organize. The Office of Religious Affairs has only approved four groups, punishing unregistered groups with imprisonment and fines.

"Unregistered religious groups lack the privileges of registered groups," a 2023 U.S. Dept. of State report said, "and their members risked arrest, mistreatment, and renunciation of their faith as a condition of their release." Many cases target independent Christians, including pastors thrown in prison for leading their congregations outside the confines set by the government.

Though many of the most severe violations of religious freedoms are directed toward unregistered groups, approved religious groups — the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Sunni Islam, the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea — are far from free themselves and live under constant government supervision.

Though detailed information from Eritrea is difficult to obtain, the country currently holds at least dozens of prisoners of conscience. The government occasionally announces amnesties for certain prisoners, granting them an early release. While these amnesties often include prisoners of conscience, those released represent just a fraction of the total detained. The government's animosity toward free religious expression continues unabated and shows no sign of easing despite consistent concern and sweeping sanctions from the international community.

GS REPORTS



Eritrea

The North Korea of Africa



State Department

2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Eritrea

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NIGERIA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Boko Haram: Founded as an Islamic school in 2002, Boko Haram quickly developed an agenda of radical Islamism and, in 2009, began a campaign of violence that continues today. While the group has splintered and changed leaders several times since its founding — today, it calls itself Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) — the group has maintained its violent tendencies and has a "priority scale" of targets, with Christians at the top, followed by the government and Muslims who have not joined the group.1

Even among its terrorist counterparts, Boko Haram is considered radically extreme for its indiscriminate efforts to exterminate those who oppose its philosophy. While analysts believe the group has aligned itself with al-Qaida, it has never been accepted into full membership with the group because of its extreme violence against Muslim civilians.² Similarly, the Islamic State group (IS) has shunned Boko Haram, preferring more selective violence against Christians and a conciliatory attitude toward more moderate Muslims.3

Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP): After Boko Haram declared allegiance to the Islamic State group (IS) in 2015, part of the group split off in 2016 and formed a separate terrorist organization that soon gained recognition from IS and is today known as ISWAP. According to analysts, Boko Haram's scorched-earth tactics were too much for IS to stomach, leading it to align with ISWAP instead.

ISWAP has had remarkable success mimicking al-Qaida tactics even while taking direction from IS. In fact, many of its attacks on Christian communities can be attributed to its efforts to befriend and blend in with nearby Muslim communities rather than extort them as Boko Haram did. ISWAP even gives loans to young entrepreneurs and recruits fighters by providing infrastructure and social aid to locals in need. It is a technique stolen from the al-Qaida playbook, and ISWAP is using it to grow into the largest IS affiliate in Africa.

Local Extremists and Fulani Militants: While much of the violence tearing Nigeria apart derives from organized terrorist groups, many communities have become radicalized over time and collectively contribute significantly to the total death toll in the country. Often triggered by other issues like conflicts over limited grazing or water resources, they quickly take on a religious tone that leads to violence against religious leaders, houses of worship, and entire communities known for their religious affiliation.

According to at least one analyst of local militancy in Nigeria, ISWAP is funding Fulani militants in their attacks on Christian farmers, an ongoing conflict that ISWAP views as "another opportunity to target Christians, who they view as a key obstacle to establishing an Islamic State in West Africa." This insertion of terrorist funding further underscores the religious undertones of even local conflicts and highlights the need to address the element of religious persecution at every level of violence in Nigeria.



"TERRORISM, VIOLENT MILITANCY, AND LOCAL UNREST CONTINUE TO **ROCK NIGERIA'S MANY FRAGILE** CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES."

-ICC STAFFER

STATE DEPARTMENT STATUS

COUNTRY STATUS

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1 LEVEL 2 LEVEL 3

2020 CPC

RECONSIDER TRAVEL to Nigeria due to crime, terrorism, civil unrest, kidnapping, and armed gangs. Some areas have increased risk. (State Department, as of Sept. 20, 2023)

PERSECUTION MEASURES

RADICAL ISLAM & EXTREMISM

When the Islamic State was territorially defeated in 2019, it shifted tactics and today mainly runs via a network of affiliates around the world. One of its major theaters of operation is Africa, where it and its rival al-Qaida are waging a growing war on peace, stability, and human rights. While their tactics sometimes differ, and they regularly clash over territory, the groups share a common goal — the creation of an Islamic caliphate that would rule the area with Sharia law. Under this vision, Christians and moderate Muslims suffer greatly.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

Chapter 19, Section 204 of Nigeria's federal criminal code outlaws any act "which any class of persons consider as a public insult on their religion," providing that such act was intentionally offensive. 5 According to the law, such an offense is punishable by two years in prison. As written, this law theoretically protects insults to any religion, though its practical use could be in favor of just

Nigeria's 12 northern states use Sharia law, which contains blasphemy provisions that explicitly protect Islam, and Sharia courts are known to hand down severe punishments for blasphemy — insulting Islam — and apostasy — leaving Islam — including death by hanging.⁶ While the secular appeals court can and does overturn these rulings, the Sharia law that underpins these types of extreme convictions remains and serves to limit the rights of Christians in these areas.

POLITICS

Nigeria is a land of many fault lines. Ethnically, economically, and religiously diverse, Nigeria often experiences the ugly reality of identity-based politics. While political candidates pay occasional lip service to the importance of unity and inter-communal harmony, the louder theme in Nigerian politics is one of division and sectarian appeals to rally specific ethnic and religious groups against the other groups supposedly bent on their demise.

The Nigerian political system does have some checks in place to stem these sectarian tendencies, but they are imperfectly followed. Christians and Muslims, by tradition, take turns running viable candidates for the presidency to avoid a concentration of power in the hands of one or the other. In 2023, however, the Muslim political machine broke with this tradition by running Bola Tinubu, a longtime Muslim kingmaker, who won the presidency and further broke with tradition by choosing a Muslim vice president rather than someone from the other religion, as his predecessors had done.⁷

ICC @ WORK

The Advocacy team has led two campaigns on Capitol Hill on behalf of H.R. 82, urging Congress to designate Nigeria a Country of Particular Concern for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom; and the need to appoint a special envoy for Nigeria and the Lake Chad region and for other purposes. The Advocacy team also traveled to Nigeria in March 2024 to conduct research for a report that was released in July 2024 titled, "A Case for Nigeria's CPC Status." Advocacy also led a petition on behalf of the Du Merci Orphanage Case that garnered more than 1,000 signatures.

Fulani Extremists Kill 18 Christians in Benue State July 23, 2024

Around 11 p.m. on July 19, Islamic Fulani militants launched yet another attack on the Mbacher community of Katsina-Ala local government area, killing 18 Christians and wounding many others. The militants reportedly went from house to house, gathering villagers, which they brought to another location and shot them. Justine Shaku, the Katsina-Ala local government's chairman, confirmed the attack.

"I quickly mobilized the military officers in Tor Doonga," he said. "Being a remote area, before they could reach there, the people had been killed."

"I no longer call them bandits because I'm seeing elements of terrorism in their activities," he added. "I classify them as terrorists now."

Muslim Extremists Abduct Second Church Leader in 3 Weeks June 24, 2024

For the second time this month, unidentified Muslim extremists have kidnapped a church leader in Nigeria.

The gunmen abducted the Rev. Mikah Suleiman in the early hours of Saturday, June 22, while he was at his rectory. The Rev. Suleiman is the parish priest of St. Raymond Catholic Church in the Damba area of Gusau, Zamfara state.

"We humbly ask all members of the Church and all people of goodwill to earnestly pray for his swift and safe release," said the Rev. Nuhu Iliya, acting chancellor of the Catholic Diocese of Sokoto.

Islamic Fulani Militants Kill Pastor, Wife, 3 Other Church Members June 4, 2024

Within a week of meetings between the Christian Irigwe and Muslim Fulani leaders seeking peaceful relations, armed radical Islamic gunmen attacked a Christian community, killing five people. The attack occurred Sunday evening, June 2, in Kimapka, Kwall district, Irigwe chiefdom of Bassa Local government area in Plateau State.

According to a press release from the Irigwe Development Association (IDA), those killed in the attack include Dauda Dalyop, 63, pastor of Assemblies of God Church, Kwall; his wife Chummy Dauda, 57; Chwe Ajuhs, 26; Joshua Kusa, 45; and Rikwe Doro, 43. Sunday Abila, 36, was injured.

ISIS Affiliate ISWAP Executes 3 Christians in Nigeria June 7, 2024

Images of members of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) executing three Christian men in Borno state, Nigeria, are circulating on social media.

One image, allegedly shared on June 4 by the Islamic State group through its propaganda outlet, Amaq News Agency, shows the Christian men kneeling with their arms tied behind their backs before three masked gunmen. Another image shows the bodies of the believers falling to the ground under a cloud of smoke from the Islamic extremists' machine guns.

The Islamic extremists reportedly abducted the men from a vehicle traveling along a highway that runs through the northern Nigerian state on June 3. Muslim passengers were allowed to leave. The terrorists reportedly abducted a fourth passenger, but their condition is unknown at this time.

Militant Fulani Violence Sparks Hunger **Concerns Among Nigeria's Christian** Communities May 9, 2024

Christian communities already weary of Islamic Fulani militant attacks are increasingly concerned that the violence could lead to food scarcity in Nigeria's agriculturally rich northcentral region.

Militant Fulani have attacked Christian farmers in the region for more than 20 years. Without government assistance to help them recover from the attacks, these communities have seen a decline in agricultural production. The situation is particularly concerning as the region is a vital agricultural hub for the country and could lead to widespread hunger.

A local told an International Christian Concern (ICC) staff member that Fulani gunmen recently attacked two Christian farmers on their farm in Maiyanga Village, Northwest of Plateau state, killing one of them. The other farmer escaped injured.



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

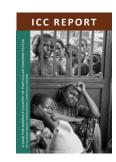






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REPORTS



ICC's Nigeria Report A Case for Nigeria's Country of Particular Concern Status



State Department

2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Nigeria

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

A recovering British colony, Nigeria has long suffered from internal stresses that threaten to tear it apart. Whether ethnic, economic, or religious, there seems to be no end to the fault lines. Still, some are more obvious than others. Ethnic and economic divides, for example, are easy to see — the country is home to more than 250 distinct ethnic groups, and there are large regional disparities in access to resources. Unfortunately, religious tensions are often ignored at the cost of the ability to forge an effective solution to the nuanced issues at stake.

Nigeria is currently in its fourth and longest attempt at democracy since independence from British rule in 1960. Elections in February 2023 led Bola Tinubu, a member of the All-Progressives Congress (APC) party, to the presidency with a relatively compelling 37% of the vote to the second-place finisher's 29%. However, only 27% of eligible voters participated in the election, meaning that Tinubu's victory netted him just 9.3% of eligible voters — hardly a compelling electoral mandate in a country already struggling to find common ground.

Historically, the government — under both Christian president Goodluck Jonathan and Muslim president Muhammadu Buhari — has failed to provide any effective response to the violence or adequate protection to vulnerable communities regularly targeted for their religion, such as in southern Kaduna state where Christian communities have been attacked by Muslim extremists and endangered by government decrees throughout the years. Estimates vary, but conservatively more than 50,000 Christians have been killed in Nigeria over the past 20 years and hundreds of thousands more displaced.

If Tinubu is serious about quelling the violence in Nigeria, one factor he must address is religion. Though not the only factor at play, it is a major one that he cannot afford to ignore.

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THE SAHEL

The Sahel is a loose geographic designation given to a strip of land in Africa south of the Sahara Desert. As a geopolitical term, it can include the countries of Burkina Faso, Chad, Eritrea, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Sudan, though this list may vary depending on the context.

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Boko Haram: Since its founding in 2002, Boko Haram has grown into a regional terrorist group and now operates in northern Nigeria, southeast Niger, Cameroon, and Chad. The group is dedicated to creating an area of complete Islamic domination and uses a degree of violence to carry out its goals that have long turned off even other terrorist organizations, according to reports.¹

Known for its mass abductions of schoolchildren, some of whom it has assimilated into its ranks as wives or child soldiers, Boko Haram has managed to survive and even grow despite an international coalition dedicated to its eradication. The group is reported to have a "priority scale" of targets, with Christians at the top, followed by the government and Muslims who have not joined the group.²

Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP): Originally made up of Boko Haram fighters who split off from the group, ISWAP gained recognition from the Islamic State (IS) in 2016. Today, the group is engaged in a high-stakes war with Boko Haram for territory despite their shared ideology of radical Islamism.

ISWAP works across the Lake Chad Basin in Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger and uses a distinct set of tactics from Boko Haram, preferring to befriend and blend in with local Muslim communities. The terrorist group even gives loans to young entrepreneurs and recruits fighters by providing infrastructure and social aid to locals in need. It is a technique stolen from al-Qaida's playbook; ISWAP has used it to set up a proto state in the area and become the largest IS affiliate in Africa.³

Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) & Rapid Support Forces (RSF): In Sudan, only about 5.4% of the population is Christian, while about 91% identify as Sunni Muslim. The state of religious freedom in Sudan has been bleak for decades, and Christians were severely persecuted under the 30-year reign of dictator Omar al-Bashir and the Sharia-based legal system he imposed. When Bashir was overthrown in 2019 in a military coup, it was unclear how the coup would change the fortunes of the county's religious minority communities.

In the years since, the SAF and RSF have failed to deliver sustained increases in religious freedom in the country. Indeed, both groups actively attack churches. Despite various high-level changes, including the repeal of the country's apostasy law, the reality for Christians on the ground never improved.⁴ The SAF and RSF alliance fell apart in April 2023, prompting a devastating civil war that continues to this day and has utterly devastated Sudan's civilian population, both Christian and Muslim. More than 8 million people have been displaced since the war began, and reports indicate that the violence and discrimination against Christians have not ceased.



"ACROSS THE SAHEL, TERRORISM AND MILITANT UNREST IS UPENDING CIVILIAN LIFE AND RENDERING REGULAR RELIGIOUS PRACTICE DANGEROUS OR IMPOSSIBLE."

-ICC STAFFER

STATE DEPARTMENT STATUS

COUNTRY STATUS

EPC

2024 ISIS-Sahel, ISIS-West Africa, Boko Haram, al-Shabab (Entities of Particular Concern)

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1 LEVEL 2 LEVEL 3

Countries in the Sahel region consist multiple warnings from the State Dept including Burkina Faso (4), Chad (3), Eritrea (2), The Gambia (2), Guinea-Bissau (3), Mali (4), Mauritania (3), Niger (3), Senegal (1), and Sudan (4).

PERSECUTION MEASURES

RADICAL ISLAM & EXTREMISM

Extreme poverty and civil unrest have plagued the Sahel region for decades. Nearly 65% of the Sahel's population is younger than 25 years old, making it one of the youngest regions in the world and indicating the area's extreme challenges to survival.⁵ In this difficult context, radicalization and religious extremism are growing, fueled by mass discontent with the status quo and the need to protect resources from competing groups.

Unfortunately, this extremism often influences religious leaders and their communities, especially in areas where they might be the religious minority. Clashes over resources like land and water metastasize into religious conflicts, with religious leaders, churches, and communities attacked and sometimes massacred. Religious animosity is now a driving factor in many conflicts and must be addressed for peace and cooperation to return.

POLITICS

Though no single political issue is fueling religious repression in the Sahel, political instability and frequent coups have rendered the region's governments incapable of effective cooperation against terrorist extremism. Across the region, military coups have become common amid rising popular frustration with how the governments have responded to terrorism, though the military governments that have not managed to reverse the growing trend either.⁶

REFUGEES & IDP CAMPS

Due to the mass unrest in the Sahel, millions of civilians have been displaced, either internally or across borders in refugee camps. More than 8 million have been displaced since war in Sudan broke out in 2023, and the U.N. estimates that about 3.3 million were displaced at the beginning of 2024 across Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. While this displacement has affected followers of every religion, terrorist groups often select Christians and disfavored religious groups for targeted violence and are particularly vulnerable to displacement.

ICC @ WORK

The countries in the Sahel are some of the poorest in the world. Jihadist groups capitalize on the political instability in these regions and people's grievances. They operate easily due to weak government structures within the region and can easily recruit members — usually adolescent boys — to their cause by offering them services their government fails to deliver. Because of this, much of what ICC does is work to offset the expansion of this extremism. We provide opportunities for youth, such as schooling and skills training, to give them autonomy over their future. We also emphasize spreading the gospel through supporting missionaries and empowering churches.

Christians Continue to Suffer Amid Ongoing Civil War in Sudan Sept. 3, 2024

The ongoing war in Sudan between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has killed thousands and displaced many million more. Estimates suggest that about 8.2 million civilians have been displaced since fighting between the groups broke out in April 2023, including many religious minorities who have long struggled to survive in the country.

Only about 5% of Sudan's population is Christian, while about 91% identify as Sunni Muslim. The state of religious freedom in Sudan has been bleak for decades, with Christians severely persecuted during the 30-year reign of dictator Omar al-Bashir and the Shariabased legal system he imposed.

Attack on Catholic Church Leaves 15 Dead in Burkina Faso Feb. 27, 2024

On Feb. 25, a group of gunmen violently attacked a Catholic church in Essakane Village, located in the Oudalan province. The assailants opened fire during worship, resulting in the tragic loss of 12 lives and leaving five others injured. Later, three succumbed to their injuries at the hospital.

According to a statement from a church official, the attackers are suspected to be Islamic militants. The head of the local diocese, Abbot Jean-Pierre Sawadogo, expressed the community's grief, saying, "In this painful circumstance, we invite you to pray for those who died in faith, for the healing of the wounded, and for the consolidation of grieving hearts."

Nigeriens Killed in an Attack by Hundreds of Jihadists Oct. 6, 2023

Hundreds of Jihadists attacked and killed seven Nigerien soldiers in the southwest region of Niger on Thursday, Sept. 28. Five others lost their lives in a traffic accident that occurred while trying to respond to the attack.

Niger's defense minister, Salifou Mody, said in a statement that a military unit had been "violently attacked by several hundred terrorists" in the town of Kandadji on Thursday, according to reports from France 24.

The area where this attack took place has become an epicenter for jihadist violence. It is located in the Tillaberi region and is called the "three borders" zone where Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali meet. The primary jihadist actors who conduct their activities there include al-Qaida and groups affiliated with the Islamic State.

Terrorists Run Rampant after U.N. Withdrawal in Mali Oct. 4, 2023

Mali faces worse conditions as forces from the United Nations continue their departure from the country. Terrorist groups including affiliates from al-Qaida, the Islamic State, and jihadists run rampant in the military-junta-run country.

Since the U.N. started pulling its troops in July, "Islamic militants in Mali have created a blockade of Timbuktu by cutting road access and shutting off river and air routes" and shooting rockets which "hit a hospital, killing two children, and landed near a school where survivors of a passenger boat attack that killed more than 100 people were sheltering," according to Reuters.

Mali is currently run by a junta that has refused and protested the support of U.N. and French forces, effectively driving them out of the country. The junta does receive support, however, from Russia's Wagner Group which, despite sending 1,000 mercenaries to aid the junta, has failed to control the conflict and is accused of attacking civilians.

1.800 Terrorist Attacks Recorded in West Africa in the Last 6 Months July 26, 2023

In the first six months of 2023, West Africa recorded more than 1,800 terrorist attacks, contributing to up to 4,600 deaths.

The astonishing figures were reported by regional official Omar Touray to the United Nations Security Council on Tuesday. The violence, which has forced 6.2 million people to flee their homes as internally displaced people (IDP) and made 30 million in need of humanitarian assistance, is just "a snippet of the horrendous impact of insecurity," Touray reported.

"The reversal of democratic gains runs parallel to insecurity that West Africa and the Sahel have been facing for some time now," he said, adding that between Jan. and June 30, there were 2,725 attacks in Burkina Faso, 844 in Mali, 77 in Niger and 70 attacks in Nigeria that all led to 4,593 deaths. The recent coup in Niger only exacerbates the situation.

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



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Ethnic and economic divides in the Sahel are easy to see. The region is home to hundreds of distinct ethnic groups, and there are large regional disparities in access to resources. Unfortunately, policy makers often ignore religious tensions in the area at the cost of the ability to forge an effective solution to the nuanced issues at stake.

Terrorist groups in the Sahel are increasingly taking the place of failed governments. ISWAP has made great territorial gains by stepping into a quasi-governmental role in some areas. From distributing medicine, providing education, improving roads, and distributing Qurans, ISWAP is beginning to see glimpses of the Islamic caliphate it has dedicated itself to building.

The quasi-governmental role provided by these terrorist groups, while likely welcomed by some communities desperate for some semblance of stability, should not be mistaken as some kind of positive development. In fact, human rights and the right to worship freely have suffered a devastating blow under the influence of these terrorist groups, which are openly dedicated to eradicating any vestiges of representative or rights-based order.

If the international coalition dedicated to fighting terrorism in the region is serious about its commitment, one factor that must be addressed is religious freedom. Though not the only factor driving conflict or suffering as a result of terrorist gains, it is a major one and one that the world cannot afford to ignore.

REPORTS



State Department

Office of the Special envoy for the Sahel Region of Africa

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SOMALIA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Al-Shabab: While active in the Horn of Africa region more broadly, terrorist group al-Shabab has gained particular power in Somalia, where it was founded in the early 2000s. Violently anti-government, al-Shabab has also stated that it will kill any Christians it might find. The group is aligned with the transnational terrorist group al-Qaida, with which al-Shabab coordinates and has received training.

Al-Shabab is dedicated to creating an Islamic caliphate in Somalia and is known to use extreme violence toward that end, with regular attacks not only on government personnel but on public sites like hotels and restaurants.² While an estimated 99.9% of the country is Muslim, a small Christian population does exist, living in utmost secrecy because of the many threats to its faith.

Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs: Under the provisional constitution, Somalia is an Islamic state based on Sharia law. Christians are strictly prohibited from sharing their faith and there is a de facto ban on apostasy, given local interpretation of Sharia law. While the country's legal system is largely unwritten, and many areas have fallen outside of practical government influence, Sharia and local tradition combine to create an oppressive legal environment for minorities.

The Ministry of Endowments and Religious affairs regulates religious organizations in the country, yet its ability to enforce its rules and regulations is limited along with the rest of the government. While it does make efforts to promote harmony and counter al-Shabab's extremist messaging, the ministry is part of the country's repressive stance toward religious minorities, including in Islamic religious education.

STATE DEPARTMENT STATUS

COUNTRY STATUS

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TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL

LEVEL 4

NONE

DO NOT TRAVEL to Somalia due to crime, terrorism, civil unrest, health issues, kidnapping, piracy, and lack of availability of routine consular services. (State Department, as of July 23, 2024).



"RAMPANT TERRORISM AND A CLOSED ISLAMIC GOVERNMENT MAKE SOMALIA A DANGEROUS PLACE FOR THE COUNTRY'S TINY RELIGIOUS MINORITY COMMUNITIES."

-ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

RADICAL ISLAM & EXTREMISM

While government and allied forces keep control of most urban centers, al-Shabab controls or influences much of the rest of the country. Al-Shabab imposes a strict interpretation of Sharia law in areas it controls and imposes the system on Muslims and non-Muslims alike, which severely limits Christians. The group also launches regular attacks on government-controlled towns and cities.

The government makes public efforts to combat the extremism that al-Shabab promotes, but itself perpetuates a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam and similarly imposes Sharia law on all citizens, regardless of their religion. As a result, extremism is rampant throughout the country and leaves Christians with little space to practice their faith, even in secret.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

In a study conducted by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), Somalia was found to have the world's fourth-worst blasphemy law in terms of how severely it runs counter to the principles of international law and human rights.³ Al-Shabab executes those it believes to be guilty of blasphemy, while the government imposes prison sentences on those deemed guilty of insulting Islam.

While the law does not have an explicit prohibition on leaving Islam for another religion, Sharia is interpreted to prohibit the act, and the courts ban the practice. The judicial system is extremely informal, depending on local interpretations of Sharia and *xeer*, or traditional and customary law, which varies from locality to locality.⁴ As a result, religious minorities tried in one place may experience different treatment from those tried in another place.

ICC @ WORK

ICC works with persecuted believers in Somalia, but due to the nature of the work, we're unable to provide more details for security reasons.



Children in Tukaraq, Somalia. Unsplash / Ismail Salad Osman Hajji dirir

REPORTS



State Department

2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Somalia



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

ICC NEWSROOM

6 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.

100 Killed in Somalia Terrorist Attack

Oct. 31, 2022

Al-Shabab, a terrorist group affiliated with al-Qaida, launched a deadly attack in Somalia's capital city, Mogadishu, on Saturday, Oct. 29. Two cars packed with explosives blew up within minutes of each other near the city's busy Zobe intersection. Following the explosion, militants opened gunfire on pedestrians.

According to a statement released by Somalia's president Hassan Sheikh Muhamud, "So far, the number of people who died has reached 100, and 300 are wounded, and the number for both the dead and wounded continues to increase."

Al-Shabab Kills 9 People in Another Hotel Attack Oct. 24, 2022

On Sunday, Oct. 23, militants attacked a hotel in Kismayo, a city in southern Somalia. The attackers, who were later identified as members of al-Shabab, an Islamic extremist group, set off a car bomb near the hotel and then stormed the property.

The assault began at 12:45 p.m., when the car laden with explosives rammed into the hotel entrance. The siege lasted until 7 p.m., when the attackers were stopped by security forces. There were four total attackers, including one suicide bomber who detonated an explosive vest. The remaining three attackers were killed by police.

Nine civilians were killed and 47 people were wounded in the attack. The casualties included students leaving a nearby school.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

According to reports, the al-Shabab terror group provides basic services to citizens in a campaign that is earning them popular sympathy in the East African country. Al-Shabab is linked to the transnational al-Qaida terror network and has grown in destructive power in recent years.

While terrorist organizations emphasize attacking enemies and expanding their territories, al-Qaida also works to build rapport with local communities by sponsoring public goods like roads, providing some sort of education, and establishing a justice system.

Other terrorist groups are increasingly following this playbook, including ISWAP, working to the west of Somalia in the Lake Chad region. There, ISWAP even provides scholarships for young men seeking further education and has amassed a considerable amount of territory by combining brutal attacks with public service.

In Somalia, al-Shabab is setting up a parallel legal system to address private citizens' legal concerns. With the government unable to control areas outside of urban areas, the official legal system in rural parts of the country now depends on al-Shabab's Sharia courts, which provide a swift and cheap alternative to the official Somali system, where cases can drag on for years and legal fees often bar people from entry in the first place.

By providing an alternative forum in which to bring legal complaints, al-Shabab is meeting a need. But this should not be confused with real justice — the system created by al-Shabab is highly arbitrary and, based as it is on Sharia law, is deeply discriminatory against Christians who have little standing before the court and are forced to abide by an extremist interpretation of Islamic moral law despite their religious convictions.

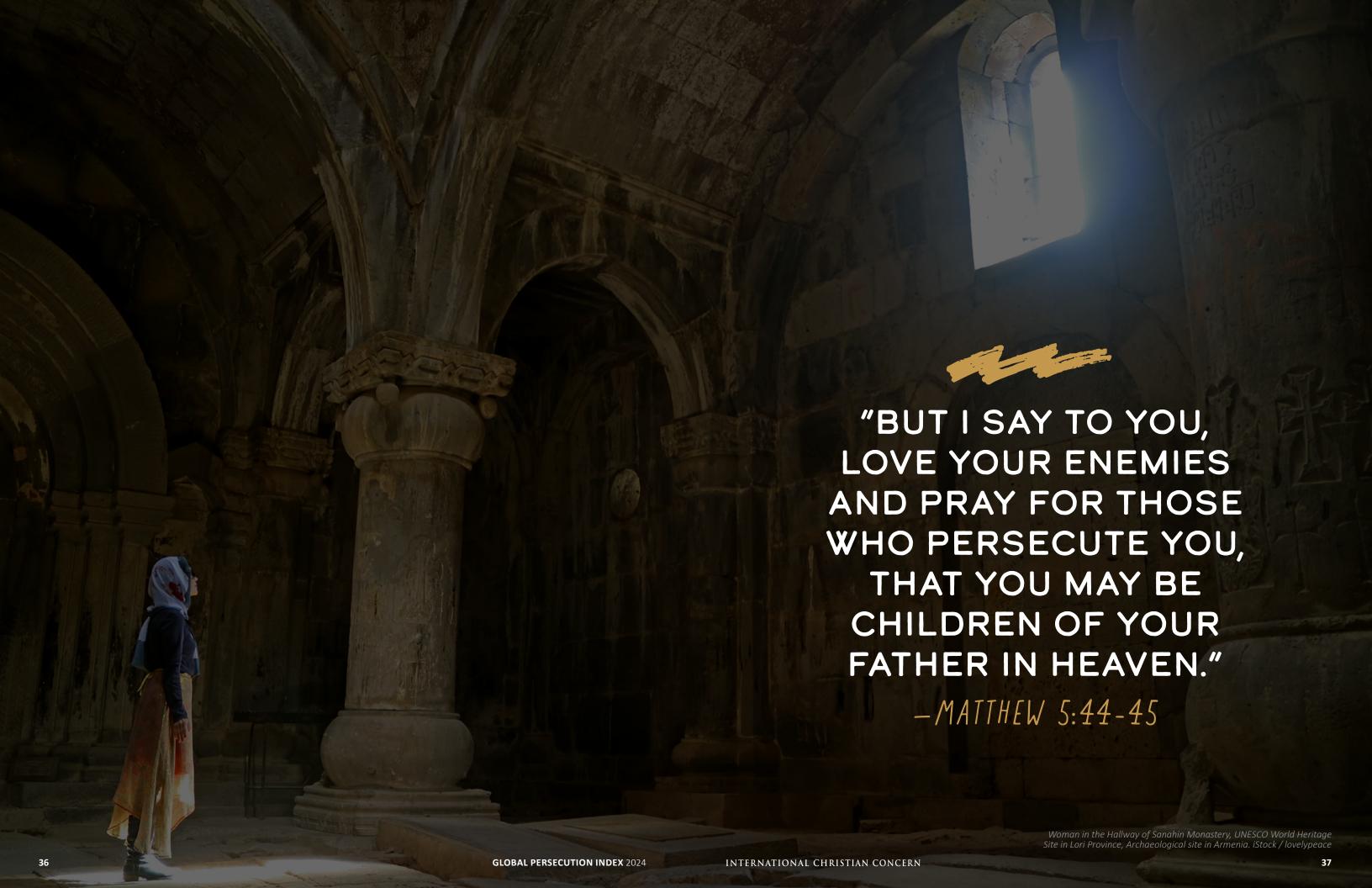
Religious minorities in Somalia have nowhere to turn. The government is openly antagonistic to Christianity and is unabashed about its efforts to promote Islam over all other belief systems. But the alternative — al-Shabab — is a jihadist terror group dedicated to creating an Islamic caliphate that utterly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

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.

While much of this violence has its origins in ethnic or political strife, the region has also witnessed significant persecution. The international community would do well to consider how the United States could work to promote religious freedom in Somalia and the region more broadly. There is no simple fix for persecution, but the ability to freely practice one's religion is a basic human right and one that must not be forgotten as the United States works toward peace and stability in the region.

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RUSSIA

OVERVIEW

Russia has criminalized faith within its borders and in occupied Ukraine. Russia's Tsarist-style government, along with its chief enforcer, the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarch (ROC-MP), is the archetype of state control and oppression, and communities of faith are the battlegrounds.

It is important to understand the backdrop against which Christian persecution is set in Russia, which is President Vladimir Putin's absolute focus on Russia's ascendency and his role in it. Putin's leadership style is illustrated by his autocratic approach that manipulates societal institutions and fuels a warped nationalism to smother opposition voices and leverage the Russian legal system to maintain his hold on power.

Putin is an ardent promoter of Russkiy Mir, a worldview that "Russia is not a mere nation-state but a civilization-state that has an important role to play in world history." Russkiy Mir emphasizes intrinsic bonds and relationships, such as history, culture, and faith, that bind people together at the fundamental level without regard to mere politics. This worldview, coupled with Putin's ambition for preeminence, frames Russia's approach to communities of faith. The ROC-MP is a central pillar of Russkiy Mir and one of the chief enforcers of the cultural and religious mantle central to Russia's oppression strategy. Increasingly, communities of faith that are not aligned with the ROC-MP have undergone severe scrutiny.

Russia arbitrarily interprets its religious laws to fit its autocratic objectives, allowing it to label and condemn spiritual practices that it finds threatening to its regime as extremist and unlawful. Russian authorities have criminalized religious speech and activities and have banned religious literature. Missionary activities (an ill-defined legal term in Russia) have been prohibited, and communities of faith are constantly penalized without adequate justification, resulting in an environment of systemic fear and persecution in the form of arbitrary arrests, draconian fines, harassment, and destruction of reputations.²

Russia's persecution of its Christian communities, particularly Protestants and Evangelicals, has escalated since the invasion of Ukraine due to their objection to Russia's incursion. According to USCIRF, Russia's ruthless oppression of those who spoke out against its invasion of Ukraine on moral or faith-based grounds "continued at startling heights" and included harassment, discrimination, detention, imprisonment, fines, and deportations.³ According to Forum 18, an NGO monitoring freedom of religion issues, agents of Russia's Federal Security Service have harassed and threatened clergy with prosecution if they expressed dissent over Russia's war in Ukraine.⁴ For instance, in March 2023, Russia sentenced Mikhail Simonov, an Orthodox Christian, to seven

years in prison for a social media post invoking God in his protest of the war.³ Similarly, a court in St. Petersburg sentenced

Ioann Kurmoyarov, an Orthodox

hieromonk, to three years in prison for posting videos and citing religious grounds for protesting Russia's invasion of Ukraine.³

TARGETING UKRAINE

In occupied Ukraine, Christian persecution is more overt and aggressive than in Russia and functions to accomplish Putin's strategic objectives. In February 2022, Russia initiated a largescale invasion of Ukraine, escalating its 2014 aggression toward its neighboring country. Putin's publicly stated goals for the invasion were Ukraine's demilitarization and the liberation of the Eastern Ukrainian regions of Luhansk and Donetsk from what he characterized as corrupt and Nazi-influenced. The actual reasons behind the invasion were more geopolitically motivated. Russia's invasion sought to regain what it considered its rightful authority over Ukraine, secure Russia's borders, and prevent further NATO expansion. 5 However, Putin's articulated liberation narrative gave Russia a moral foundation to rationalize military interventions and reinforced his domestic messaging of a protector of Russian heritage and Orthodox principles. The narrative also justified the harsh treatment of Ukraine's Christian communities.

According to UNESCO, Russia has damaged or destroyed, through direct targeting or indirect fires via artillery and other explosives, at least 125 religious sites. However, other organizations report that the number is closer to 630 sites since the 2022 invasion.³ The human toll is more grim. Russian forces' persecution of Ukraine's Christians is profound and achieved through harassment, intimidation, and assault. Details of torture, disappearances, and threats to Christian communities are frequent and ongoing.² A 2023 report revealed that Russian forces persecuted 43 clergy, including murder and kidnapping.^{7,8} Testimony at the United Nations in July 2023 featured "incidents of violence against Ukrainian religious communities," including "disappearances, arbitrary detention, torture, and unlawful deportation."9 The primary targets of repression have been affiliates of protestant communities in Russia's attempt to rid the occupied territories of any religious belief that contradicts the ROC-MP.6 The targeting of churches and persecution of Christians in Ukraine extends beyond mere religious repression; it's a political strategy to destroy Ukrainian identity and expand Russkiy Mir. The specific targeting of religious leaders also reflects Russia's broader efforts to silence resistance.6



Gilded domes of the Cathedral of the Savior of the Holy Face alongside the Church of the Deposition of the Robe in the Moscow Kremlin. Unsplash/Anton Volunhin

PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN

Putin's political dominance is derived from his control over Russia's societal institutions and security apparatus. His center of gravity is the continuation of his regime, which he accomplishes by suppressing dissent and enforcing subordination. Putin aggressively propagandizes nationalism and the primacy of the ROC-MP's brand of Orthodoxy to justify his right to power. Religious communities that deviate from the state-sanctioned ROC-MP in Russia are persecuted. In Russian-controlled Ukraine, the violence against Christians has escalated and contributed to significant human suffering.

"THE PUTIN REGIME
HAS RUN ROUGHSHOD
OVER THE CHRISTIAN
COMMUNITY IN RUSSIA
AND DESTROYED
NUMEROUS RELIGIOUS
SITES IN OCCUPIED
UKRAINE."

-ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND PATRIARCH KIRILL

While innocent and earnest people of faith may belong to the ROC-MP, its actions by its leadership and as an institution have divested it of spiritual legitimacy. Although donning the cloak of Christianity, the ROC-MP is exposed as a staunch supporter and influential partner of the autocratic Russian regime under President Putin. The ROC-MP's leader, Patriarch Kirill, whose full title is Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus' and Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, has been described by Dr. Viktor Zelenskiy, head of the State Service of Ukraine for Ethnic Affairs and Freedom of Conscience, as "the head of the most influential department of Russian government [who] shares the responsibility for Russian aggression against Ukraine, shares responsibility for this cannibalistic rhetoric of Russian government, and, in my opinion, cannot be treated in the international arena as a religious leader." ¹⁰

Patriarch Kirill has been instrumental in aligning the ROC's-MP's religious narrative with Russian state policies and in justifying the persecution of non-ROC-affiliated Christian communities. He has also been an ardent supporter of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and has framed it as a "holy war" against the West. In recent public comments, Kirill promised sainthood for Russian troops fighting in the war and declared that their sins would be washed away while executing their duties. This eerily mirrors extremist jihadist rhetoric and creates a blanket of justification for killing and committing mass atrocities, such as "raping Ukrainian women and children, torturing and murdering innocent civilians, deporting children by the thousands, and burning villages."

The ROC-MP's influence reaches Ukraine's borders through ROC-MP collaborators within the Ukraine Orthodox Church (UOC). UOC clergy have been arrested for spying for Russian forces, providing information on Ukrainian military positions, spotting for Russian snipers, and spreading propaganda supporting the Russian invasion.^{11,12} Ukrainian lawmakers passed a law in August 2024 that laid the groundwork to ban the UOC's activities, acknowledging both its spiritual bankruptcy and detrimental effect on Ukraine's military efforts.¹³

YAROVAYA LAW

Russia's Yarovaya Law, passed in 2016, built on precepts contained in Russia's 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, which defined and managed religious freedoms. The 1997 law categorized certain religions, such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, as "traditional" religions and subjected other faiths to strict regulations. The regulations restricted missions, educational activities, and communal gatherings, and established the government as an authority over religious activities.^{2,3}

The Yarovaya Law tightened the regulations of the 1997 law and imposed additional penalties on religious activities and evangelism in Russia. Although "traditional" religions are still codified in the law, Russia has elevated the status of the ROC-MP, resulting in an insistent requirement to align religious doctrine and practices with it. Christian communities who have not subscribed to the ROC-MP's Russia-first narrative have faced increased oppression, fines, and legal repercussions because of the Yarovaya law, resulting in a suppression of religious freedoms and alienation of faith communities. In 2022, Russia passed new laws, building on the Yarovaya regime. The new laws have enabled more restrictive monitoring of churches and outlawed any religious activity the government has deemed extremist, a loosely defined term in the law open to broad application.¹⁴ The Yarovaya Law has enabled Putin to weaponize faith and add it to his tool set to preserve control.¹¹

OCCUPIED UKRAINE

In Ukraine, Russia's religious persecution is more violent and direct. Its approach reflects Russia's desire to wholly and rapidly absorb Ukrainian-occupied territories into Russia's sphere of control. Unlike in Russia, churches in Ukraine enjoy religious plurality and the freedom to exercise their faith. Because of the character of the ongoing war, Russian authorities feel an urgency to upend occupied Ukraine's cultural, religious, and societal structures, resulting in scorched earth tactics that do not consider the human cost. This is illustrated by the reckless targeting of churches and spiritual centers and the brutal suppression of clergy and religious leaders.

The Russian military views Ukrainian communities of faith as threats due to their independent thought and provision of hope, resulting in a restless or resistant Ukrainian population. Additionally, successful dissent by religious leaders in Ukraine jeopardizes the messaging within Russia and raises the aspect of more protests by religious leaders, which threatens stability. Russia's oppression of Ukraine's Christian communities will be a priority for the duration of the war.



St. Basil's Cathedral on Red Square iStock/Damir Karan

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COUNTRY STATUS

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2023 COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

TRAVEL ADVISORY

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LEVEL 4

DO NOT TRAVEL to Russia due to the consequences of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian military forces. U.S. citizens may face harassment or detention by Russian security officials, arbitrary enforcement of local laws, limited flights into and out of Russia, and the possibility of terrorism. The U.S. Embassy has limited ability to assist U.S. citizens in Russia. The Department has determined that there is a continued risk of wrongful detention of U.S. nationals by Russian authorities. U.S. citizens residing or traveling in Russia should leave immediately. (State Department, as of June 27, 2024).

CHURCH STATUS

Christian churches in Russia that are not aligned with the ROC-MP face increasing pressure to "get on board" and mold their faith practices in concert with Russian state preeminence. The regulation of public expressions of faith and activities such as sharing beliefs are profoundly burdensome, and any perception by Russian authorities of a slight to the government and its policies results in unjust measures disrupting churches, families, and individuals. While faith communities can worship, their circumstances are progressively restricted, and persecution has become a fact of life.

Churches in occupied Ukraine are facing a more direct and violent crackdown by Russian forces due to the urgency felt by Putin's government to quickly and completely quell any opposing sentiment and integrate Russkiy Mir while it still controls the area. Christian communities not aligned with the ROC-MP suffer a dual-pronged attack of religious and political persecution.

What Putin's Re-Election Means for Christians March 22, 2024

President Vladimir Putin of Russia was re-elected on March 15 for his fifth presidential term. Ruling for nearly a quarter-century, Putin received 87% of the vote in Friday's election, and congratulations from Chinese President Xi Jinping, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, the Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, and the President of Belarus Aleksandr Lukashenko.

Once Putin reaches the end of his fifth term, he will be the longestserving Russian leader since Catherine the Great, who ruled in the 18th century. Generally, religious freedom issues in Russia do not significantly affect the largest Christian denomination present in the country. Approximately 71% of Russia's population identifies as Orthodox Christians, which is Putin's professed religion. While Orthodoxy is one religion protected under the constitution, the government simultaneously prohibits violating public order or extremist activity, which is not defined.

Religious groups that typically endure Russian persecution include Protestants and Roman Catholics. NGO groups have reported several instances of attacks on protestant churches and the confiscation of religious literature. Russian officials frequently arrest missionaries for "illegal" work, including the recent arrest of a South Korean Christian missionary.

Additionally, religious persecution of Ukrainians remains high during the time of war between the two countries. Several NGOs reported the detention and deaths of specifically protestant civilians in the city of Mariupol in March of 2022.

20 Dead Following Attack on Churches, Synagogues in Russia June 24, 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.



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

Russian Orthodox Church Allegedly Backs Religious Persecution Campaign in Ukraine

July 20, 2023

The outspoken religious freedoms advocate and head of Global Christian Relief, David Curry, has warned that Russia is conducting a religious persecution campaign in Ukraine backed by the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Many leaders within the Russian Orthodox Church feel that Russia's ongoing "special military operation," which began in February 2022, is "divinely inspired," a belief that they allegedly used to justify the persecution of pastors and churches in Ukraine, according to the previous head of Open Doors.

A report published by Global Christian Relief in June detailed the publicized occupation by Russian forces of the Ukrainian Christian Evangelical Church of the Holy Trinity in Mariupol in May, where the clergy were ousted by thirty troops. Around 500 religious buildings, theological institutions, and sacred sites were either completely destroyed, damaged, or looted by Russian operatives since the invasion began, according to data shared at the Summit on International Religious Freedom in January by the Ukrainian Institute for Religious Freedom.

Curry has called on U.S. government officials, including the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, Rashad Hussain, and Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, on the state of the ongoing persecution. The last time Curry spoke with Blinken was in October when he called for the international court system to deem these acts as crimes of religious persecution.

USCIRF Releases Religious Freedom Report on Russia July 12, 2023

On July 5, 2023, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) released a report outlining the conditions of religious freedom as it relates to Russia. Despite outlining other severe instances of religious persecution in the past, this report highlights issues that have presented themselves since the invasion of Ukraine.

This report covers three main topics, including a general update about the country, violations conducted by Russia in Ukraine, and a reminder of policy recommendations previously stated by the commission.

USCIRF outlines in this report that "Russian authorities continue to engage in severe religious repression and have used its war in Ukraine to institute new or amend existing legal mechanisms to further suppress religious communities and decimate independent society."

ICC @ WORK

ICC's Advocacy team helped coordinate the Violations Track at the 2024 International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington, D.C. One session, Religious Freedom Violations in War and Conflict Zones, covered Russia's devastating impact on Ukraine and its religious community. Featured panelists included Dmytro Lubinets, Ukraine ombudsman; Victor Zelensky, director of the Ukrainian State Service for Ethnic Policy and Religious Affairs; and Valery Antoniuk, president of the Baptist Union of Ukraine. The session was chaired by Lauren Homer, president of Law and Liberty Trust. The IRF Summit creates a powerful coalition of organizations that fight for global religious freedom and increase public awareness and political strength for the IRF movement. More than 1,500 people from 41 countries descended on the nation's capital in January, and another 1,000 viewed the event online

REPORTS



State Department

Russia 2023 Human Rights Report

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Christian communities in Russia have been the unfortunate recipients of Putin's efforts to align state, economic, and cultural pillars underneath his autocratic rule. Through the aggressive and broad use of the Yarovaya Law and its subsequent measures and regulations, the Russian government is empowered to arbitrarily define faith practices as extremist and dangerous to the Russian way of life. The partnership between the Russian state and the ROC-MP has been significant to the oppression of religious communities. Putin has leveraged the concept of Russkiy Mir to elevate Russia as a transcendent civilization-state, and the ROC-MP's zealous enforcement of this policy has legitimized the marginalization of Christians. Since the invasion of Ukraine, Russian Christians have faced increased scrutiny and punishment.

In occupied Ukraine, religious persecution is more aggressive and reflects Russia's larger geopolitical goals. Churches and religious leaders not aligned with the ROC-MP are seen as a threat to Putin's Russkiy Mir and Russia's attempts to subsume Ukraine. The attacks on religious sites and Russia's cruel treatment of Christians are integral to Putin's overall strategy to repress both independent thought and hope for Russia's defeat. Christian persecution will likely persist as part of a broader effort to destroy Ukrainian national identity and promote Russian hegemony.



USCIRF

Russia's Religious Freedom Violations in Ukraine

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THE MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA

ISSUES AND TRENDS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

hroughout the Middle East, usually in small minority communities surrounded by the region's Muslim majority, Christianity is heavily persecuted in its ancient birthplace. From government policies that criminalize Christian thought to social norms that squeeze Christians to the edges of society, life for Christians in the Middle East is fraught with danger and violence.

Despite the persecution, some reports suggest that Christianity is growing rapidly in the region. In Iran, where government officials relentlessly attack Christianity, estimates place the annual growth rate of the Christian church at 20% — the highest in the world. Iranian officials see Christianity as a threat to their grip on power, but ironically, their iron-fisted control of the people seems to have promoted widespread disillusionment with the government, pushing everyday Iranians toward the subversive truth claims of Christianity rather than away from them.

THE ROLE OF THEOCRACIES IN CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION

There are currently six theocracies in the world, with four — Iran, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen — located in the Middle East and operating systems of Islamic governance. Of the remainder, one is the Taliban-led Islamic government in Afghanistan, and the other is the Catholic Church's Vatican City.

While religious freedom conditions vary among Middle Eastern Islamic theocracies, they generally work to limit Christians and other minorities from participating n in society, criminalize conversion from Islam, and punish those who propagate any religion other than Islam.

Iran is particularly aggressive in its enforcement of these laws and is known to sentence prisoners of conscience to death for their faith. The government maintains a large force of "morality police," responsible for public enforcement of the country's morality laws, that the government uses to ensure strict adherence to Islamic standards of dress and public behavior.

Saudi Arabia represents a different sect of Islam and is

geopolitically opposed to Iran. Yet as another Islamic theocracy, Saudi Arabia maintains a similar system of Islamic law and control over the moral decisions of its citizens.

Though some efforts are ongoing to codify its laws, Saudi Arabia's judicial system has traditionally eschewed formal rules and penalties in favor of unwritten Sharia law and penalties dependent on the discretion of individual judges. According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the wide discretion left to judges and prosecutors has led to some of the world's harshest enforcement of religious laws.

SOCIAL PRESSURES AMPLIFY PERSECUTION

In addition to threats from the government, Middle Eastern Christians face a multitude of difficulties socially and are often pushed to the margins of society by the Muslimmajority communities around them. While there are examples of peaceful Christian-Muslim coexistence, other cases demonstrate the second-class existence of many Christians in the region.

In Egypt, centuries of persecution have influenced social norms and structures, with Christians relegated to the lowest rungs of society. The education system helps to perpetuate negative stereotypes about Christians, the Jewish population, and other religious minorities.

Social persecution can take many forms, including resistance to an individual's religious conversion and widespread protests over improvements to local churches. In some cases, local extremists have attacked church buildings scheduled for renovation, successfully stalling construction or halting it.

CULTURAL NORMS AND LEGAL BARRIERS

Across the Middle East, government opposition to Christianity often amplifies social pressure, with Muslim-influenced cultural norms — such as those around adoption — finding legal backing and often trampling on the rights of already vulnerable Christian communities.

KEY CHALLENGES

GOVERNMENT OPPOSITION

Many Middle Eastern countries, particularly theocracies like Iran, have laws and policies that restrict Christian practices and discriminate against Christians. These can include limitations on church construction, blasphemy laws, and criminalization of conversion.

SOCIAL PRESSURE

Social norms and prejudices against Christians exist in many Muslim-majority societies. This can lead to discrimination, isolation, and violence against Christians.

EXTREMISM

Radical Islamic groups further threaten Christians, with attacks on churches and violence against Christians.

WAYS TO RESPOND

INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY

Continue diplomatic pressure on governments to respect religious freedom and human rights.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Promote understanding and cooperation between different religious groups.

EDUCATION AND AWARENESS

Raise awareness about the plight of Christians in the MENA region and educate the public about religious tolerance.

SUPPORT THE PERSECUTED

Provide humanitarian aid, legal assistance, long-term aid, and psychological support to persecuted Christians.



AREA OF FOCUS

AZERBAIJAN

While not a theocracy, Azerbaijan uses its authoritarian regime to target Armenians, a predominantly Christian population. This includes the destruction of Armenian Christian heritage sites and the suppression of religious freedom

EGYPT

Centuries of animosity and government policies have relegated the Christian community in Egypt to second-class status. Christians face discrimination in education, legal limitations due to blasphemy laws, and violence from extremists.

IRAN

Iran's theocratic regime is a prime example of government-sanctioned persecution. Strict blasphemy laws, limitations on conversion, and the suppression of Christian education are some of the tools used to control religious practices.

SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia's strict interpretation of Islamic law and its suppression of religious freedom have made it a challenging environment for non-Muslims, particularly Christians.

For a full list and explanations of persecution zones, visit page 8.

AZERBAIJAN

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Azerbaijani Armed Forces: Azerbaijan's military, exceptionally well equipped because of a long and close partnership with Israel, has worked for decades to undermine the sovereign autonomy of neighboring Armenia. Armenia is considered the world's oldest Christian country and is home to many important religious heritage sites that Azerbaijan has taken over and destroyed. Credible reporting from a host of watchdog organizations indicates that Azerbaijan's military regularly engages in gross violations of human rights, including torture and the extra judicial killing of captured Armenians.¹

State Committee on Religious Associations (SCWRA): The government's main branch for regulating religion, the SCWRA helps enforce a draconian set of laws on religious groups within the country. Congregations wishing to operate legally must register with the SCWRA. While the organization of an unregistered religious group is strictly prohibited, groups wishing to apply must already contain 50 members and are required to submit "citizenship, place of residence, date of birth, and religious education, as well as copies of identity documents, of each of the 50 members," according to a 2024 report by the U.S. Department of State.²

Ministry of Justice, Penitentiary Service: Religious groups within Azerbaijan report that authorities abuse and detain religious figures on spurious criminal charges designed to restrain what the government sees as political dissent. Religious activists and leaders frequently face trumped-up charges related to the supposed possession of drugs.³ Some of those detained report that police planted drugs on them and threatened them with rape if they would not confess to the charges being levied against them.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

President Ilham Aliyev: Elected to the presidency in 2003 under questionable electoral circumstances, President Aliyev of Azerbaijan has continually 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 declared himself the victor in every election.⁴

Under President Aliyev's watch, Azerbaijan successfully annexed the Armenian region of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh), a move that led to the mass exodus of Armenian Christians and the desecration of dozens of important Christian heritage sites, according to satellite analysis conducted by the research group Caucasus Heritage Watch.⁵



"NOT CONTENT WITH STIFLING THE RIGHTS OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS WITHIN ITS BORDERS, AZERBAIJAN IS WORKING WITH **ALLIES TURKEY AND ISRAEL TO EXPORT ITS PERSECUTION INTO** ARMENIA."

-ICC STAFFER

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LEVEL 1 LEVEL 2 LEVEL 3 LEVEL 4

2024 SPECIAL WATCH LIST

EXERCISE INCREASED CAUTION in Azerbaijan due to terrorism concerns and areas of armed conflict. Some areas have increased risk. (State Department, as of Nov. 2, 2023)

PERSECUTION MEASURES

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

Though about 97% of the country's population is Muslim, the legal code is of a secular and even anti-religious nature. As such, Azerbaijan does not have a blasphemy law on the books.

However, its 2009 law on religion does contain vaguely worded provisions on proselytization that could be used to limit conversions and the sharing of one's faith. Foreigners are prohibited from sharing their faith altogether, with the law labeling missionary activity as "religious propaganda."6

POLITICS

Under the leadership of President Aliyev, Azerbaijan has solidified its place among the world's authoritarian regimes. Freedom House, a well-respected watchdog group, awarded Azerbaijan zero out of 40 points for political rights in its 2024 Freedom in the World report and just seven out of 60 points for civil liberties. In the category related to religious freedom, Azerbaijan received zero points.7

While Azerbaijan recently allowed the formation of opposition political parties, analysts say that this move was not substantive and has had little to no effect on the country's political scene, as opposition candidates are prevented from holding rallies and severely limited in their ability to communicate with the electorate via the media.

EDUCATION

The Azerbaijani government uses its control of education to promote hostility toward groups seen as outsiders, including ethnic Armenians. With the stark differences in religious demography between Azerbaijan and Armenia, this ethnic hostility takes on religious undertones as well. According to reports, educators have been dismissed and students expelled for links to opposition causes.8 While private institutions for religious education exist, they operate under strict government scrutiny and are not free to operate according to their internal standards.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

Dissidents and religious figures, including religious leaders and activists, are consistently arrested and imprisoned by Azerbaijani security forces. Often based on falsified drug-possession charges, these arrests lack legitimacy and are used as a tool to suppress and intimidate any who dare stand in the way of the government's absolute control over society.

Reports from inside the country's penal system indicate that torture and threats of extreme violence are used to coerce confessions from the accused. According to the Union for Freedom of Political Prisoners of Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan detained 183 prisoners of conscience at the end of 2023, compared with 22 at the end of 2022.9

TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

Azerbaijan has long engaged in a campaign of extreme hostility toward 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.

Azerbaijan Claims Control of Artsakh

Sept. 21, 2023

Azerbaijan announced a military operation into Nagorno-Karabakh (Armenian: Artsakh) on the night of Sept. 18, after nine months of a brutal blockade on the region. Terming it as a "anti-terrorism operation," the Azerbaijani assault began with heavy artillery shelling of both military and civilian centers, drone strikes, and securing strategic mountain corridor points.

By the afternoon of Sept. 20, the lightning military operation ended with an agreed ceasefire. Azerbaijan's government in Baku announced full control of the Artsakh enclave, and Artsakh representatives have seemingly ceded control of all military installations. Thousands have been protesting in Yerevan for the Armenian government to act and protect ethnic Armenians in the enclave, enraged at the apparent silence and betrayal from the entire world at not preventing such a rapid and brutal takeover by Azerbaijan of Artsakh. Tensions remain high between Azerbaijan and Armenia while the U.N. Security Council meets today to discuss the ongoing crisis.

USCIRF Report Underlines Azerbaijani Destruction of Armenian Heritage in Artsakh June 6, 2024

The 2024 annual report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) underlined the ongoing Azerbaijani destruction of Armenian Christian heritage in Artsakh. This comes as USCIRF recommended that the State Department name Azerbaijan as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC), a designation under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), which applies to "countries that commit systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom."

Armenia, Azerbaijan Engage in Legal Battles over Artsakh Conflict at U.N. Court

May 2, 2024

Delegates of Armenia and Azerbaijan are engaged in legal battles over the Artsakh conflict, arguing before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the Hague.

The litigation dates back to September 2021, when Armenia filed a suit accusing Azerbaijan of violating the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in 1965. Less than one week later, Azerbaijan accused Armenia of similar violations under the ICERD.

Azerbaijan Destroys Armenian Church and Village, Builds Mosque in Conquered Artsakh May 23, 2024

Months after the fall of Artsakh, Azerbaijan destroyed the St. John the Baptist Church in the town of Shusi and the entire Karintak village.

Azerbaijan is also building a large mosque in Karintak, known as Dashalti in Azeri. Both the church and the village were in the Shushi province of Artsakh, which is now integrated into the Shusha province of Azerbaijan following the conquest of Artsakh in September 2023.

Azerbaijan had conquered the Shushi province during the 2020 conflict over Artsakh. In 2021, an Azerbaijani legislator posted to Twitter/X a photo of Christian clerics praying at the St. John the Baptist Church in Shushi, citing "the national cultural diversity existing in Azerbaijan" and "the atmosphere of ethnic and religious tolerance." The fall of Artsakh in 2023, however, and the continuing destruction of Armenian Christian heritage proves otherwise.

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, months-long 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



ICC @ WORK

While ICC's assistance team is not active in Azerbaijan, we have conducted several projects in Armenia, supporting Artsakh families displaced in 2023. We invested in income-generating activities, such as small business support. We also offered food aid and emotional support.

ICC's Advocacy team 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 this year 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, months-long 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.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Azerbaijan has managed to leverage its strategic location along Iran's northern border and its vast oil and gas reserves to gain outsized influence on the international stage despite decades of worsening authoritarianism and the flagrant denial of religious freedom to its citizens. Little pressure is put on it for these violations because doing so is seen as a threat to the West. Israel and Turkey, for example, are members of Western alliances but are Azerbaijan's closest allies and have provided it with critical support in its war with Armenia.

Israel, to gain an advantage over Iran, became Azerbaijan's largest weapons provider in the years leading up to the country's recent war against Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey, a major importer of Azerbaijani oil and gas, has also provided it with critical military support. As a result, Azerbaijan destroyed scores of important Christian heritage sites in Armenia and seized land in 2023 that had long been considered Armenian under international norms.

If the world refuses to confront Azerbaijan on its pattern of violence and persecution, the status quo of religious repression in Azerbaijan is likely to continue unabated.

CITATIONS

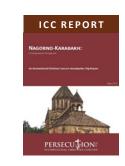
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ICC's Artsakh Brief

The Fall of Artsakh and the Ancient Roots of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict



Nagorno-Karabakh

Nagorno-Karabakh: A Humanitarian Perspective



State Department

Azerbaijan 2023 Human Rights Report

EGYPT

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Community-Level Extremists: Christians in Egypt have long experienced resistance from the local Muslim-majority community. This can take many forms, including resistance to an individual's religious conversion and widespread protests over improvements to local churches. In some cases, local extremists have attacked church buildings scheduled for renovation, successfully stalling construction or halting it altogether.¹

Ministry of Education: Egypt's educational system is designed in a way that actively promotes the majority Sunni view of Islam, promoting discrimination toward religious minorities. The government has made some improvements throughout the years, but more work remains as discriminatory content remains. Topics such as language and social studies are of particular concern, with curricula containing antisemitic and discriminatory language toward Christians, Jews, and non-Sunni Muslims. Homework furthers an exclusionary perspective of Islam, leaving religious minority students in a difficult position at school.²

Egyptian Criminal Justice System: Egypt's judicial system is notoriously problematic for human rights and religious freedom. Among other issues, it helps to discourage religion by enforcing the country's blasphemy code. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom wrote in a report, "State security, prosecutors, and courts have continued investigation, arrest, detention, prosecution and, in some cases, conviction and sentencing based on alleged breaches of the blasphemy law." In some cases, religious prisoners of conscience have been subject to unjust travel bans even after being released from prison.

STATE DEPARTMENT STATUS

COUNTRY STATUS

SWL

NONE

CPC

LEVEL

1 LEVEL 2

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 3

EVEL 4

RECONSIDER TRAVEL to Egypt due to terrorism. Exercise increased caution in Egypt due to the Embassy's limited ability to assist dual national U.S.-Egyptian citizens who are arrested or detained. (State Department, as of July 13, 2023)



"CENTURIES OF ANIMOSITY
AND STIGMATIZATION, AIDED BY
DISCRIMINATORY GOVERNMENT
POLICIES, HAVE RELEGATED THE
CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN EGYPT
TO SECOND-CLASS STATUS."

-ICC STAFFER

52 GLOBAL PERSECUTION INDEX 2024

PERSECUTION MEASURES

RADICAL ISLAM & EXTREMISM

While the Egyptian constitution states that citizens are "equal before the law" and criminalizes discrimination, a more radical and exclusionary interpretation of Islam often rises to the surface in the everyday lives of Christians and other religious minorities. Whether from radical militant groups, local communities, or in subtle forms across government, extremist elements have long challenged religious freedom in Egypt.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

Among other problematic legal stances, the Egyptian government supports an anti-blasphemy law that criminalizes minority religious expression. Despite being party to the major international human rights conventions, which universally protect the right of people to follow and share the faith of their choosing, Egypt continues to enforce this law, punishing non-Muslims for their beliefs. Though convictions for blasphemy are sporadic, the threat that they pose is serious, with prison sentences stretching up to five years. Christians and other religious minorities must tread carefully to avoid falling afoul of the law.

POLITICS

Radical Islamist groups have used attacks on Coptic Christians to score political points against the current government after the fall of Mohamed Morsi's government in 2013, leaving Christians as "pawns ... in the struggle between Sisi and the extremist groups," with Islamist groups using "the bombing of churches, and the subsequent displays of Christian persecution in the media [as a] way of showing [President] Sisi's powerlessness."⁴

The Sisi government has severely limited the political scene, effectively preventing opposition parties from participating meaningfully. As a result, there is little opportunity for the opposition to push back against discriminatory government policies. In addition, the government holds what some estimate to be tens of thousands of political prisoners, including many because of their religious beliefs.⁵

EDUCATION

Poverty, which is rampant in Egypt and is often particularly present in Christian communities, exacerbates the failings of the Egyptian educational system. The curriculum, unfortunately, promotes discrimination and hatred against religious minorities, including Christians and Jews.

Education in Egypt is woefully overcrowded, understaffed, and underfunded. As a result, it is common for families with sufficient means to supplement their children's education through private lessons after school. The necessity of these lessons for quality education adds to inequality in a deeply divided country. In many cases, the children who cannot afford private lessons are also the Christians and other religious minorities that society has pushed to its fringes.⁶

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

Research suggests that the Egyptian government is currently detaining tens of thousands of political prisoners, including scores arrested for their religious beliefs. In addition to enforcement of its blasphemy laws, the government enforces a cybercrime law protecting "the values in Egyptian society." This broad provision allows the government to crack down on Christian expression online and is actively used to restrict minority communities.

In addition to traditional arrests, the government has been known to ban Christian activists from traveling for indefinite periods, effectively keeping them under government surveillance and barring them from participating in international religious events or other forums overseas. Reports indicate that these travel bans are issued without oversight and can be extended arbitrarily.⁷

WOMEN

INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN

According to one Egyptian Christian woman interviewed by ICC, Christian women occupy the lowest ranks of Egyptian society after Muslim men, Christian men, and Muslim women, respectively. This low status is reflected in many corners of society, where Christian women are often shunned or mistreated.

Rights groups connected with the Coptic Christian community in Egypt have reported multiple incidents of abductions involving Coptic women and girls. Security services intervene in these cases, often helping to find and return the victims to their families. Still, the threat of violence and lack of social protection continues to affect Christian women in Egypt.

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ICC @ WORK

Part of the work ICC does in Egypt revolves around Christian converts from Islam, who face threats after their conversion. Egypt is the first country where we launched Hope Houses, with the most Hope Houses of any region. Currently, Egypt works with many vulnerable believers to provide small business support and relocation assistance. Many women in Egypt suffer intense persecution after converting to Christianity from Islam, and ICC finances their relocations for safety. We recently started sponsoring 90 students through English language courses. We also support students through Generation Transformation. ICC's Advocacy team continues to support and advocate for the release of Christian prisoners in Egypt.

ICC NEWSROOM

Christian Activist Detained in Egypt Starts Hunger Strike Aug. 21, 2024

A prominent Christian activist recently launched a hunger strike, protesting the Egyptian government's treatment of him while he's in prison.

Abdulbaqi Saeed Abdo, a vocal proponent of freedom of speech and conviction in the Middle East, is awaiting trial for comments he made in 2021 as part of a private Facebook group about Islam and Christianity. He has been separated from his wife and five children for more than two years. Another Christian, Nour Girgis, is also awaiting trial for comments he made as part of the same Facebook group.

Two Christians Still Awaiting Trial Years after their Arrests June 6, 2024

For more than two years, Egyptian authorities have held two Christian men without a trial. Their crime? Answering theological questions on Facebook.

Abdulbaqi Saeed Abdo and Nour Girgis were detained in late 2021 for their interactions with a Facebook group called "Al Abareen," which means "to cross over." The group supports new Christians who left Islam. Upon their arrest, Egyptian authorities attempted to link the men's interactions with the page to terrorist activities.

During the last two years, authorities have moved the two men to multiple detention centers as their trials have been repeatedly postponed. Abdo and Girgis have been kept in poor living conditions and have had limited interaction with their families or legal counsel.

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

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 engaged with local authorities for support.

Following Islamic prayers on Friday, a crowd gathered in the village, throwing stones at Christian-owned homes. Despite efforts by village security to intervene, the situation intensified as the aggressors threw stones at law enforcement. Additional security reinforcements were dispatched, leading to the arrest of several individuals involved in the violence.

Islamic Extremists Set Fire to Homes of Christians in Southern Egypt April 24, 2024

Around 11 p.m. on Tuesday, April 23, Islamic extremists set fire to several homes and shops owned by Coptic Orthodox Christians in Al-Fawakher village in Saft Al-Khammar Al-Gharbiya, Minya Governorate.

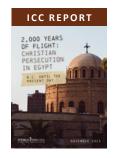
As the flames grew, the extremists attempted to prevent Christians from leaving their burning homes. However, authorities reported that there were no fatalities.

The attack occurred after word spread that residents of the village, which is home to 3,000 Christian families, had obtained a permit to construct a church building. Some associated with the church received threats after the building permit was issued, prompting Abna Makarios, Archbishop of Minya, to alert authorities.



The Mosque of Rifai and Sultan Hassan located in Cairo, Egypt. iStock / Omar Elsharawy

REPORTS



2,000 Years of FlightChristian Persecution
in Egypt - B.C. Until the
Present Day



State Department *Egypt 2023 Human Rights Report*

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Though founded nearly 2,000 years ago, the Coptic church is not considered an equal legal institution under Egyptian law. Over time, Egypt's laws have blocked it from building and restoring churches, and today, many Coptic churches face issues with registration. Reports show that local officials often block or delay church building or renovation projects in a widespread practice that hinders the Christian community in Egypt.

The law even creates issues within Christian families. A recent notable example involved a 2022 case where the authorities seized a young child from a Coptic Christian family who had adopted him years earlier. The boy, 4 years old when the authorities took him, had been abandoned as a newborn and taken in by the Christian family. After taking him, authorities placed him in a state-run orphanage, changed his name, and declared him a Muslim.

Government opposition often intersects with social pressure, with Muslim-influenced cultural norms — such as those around adoption — finding legal backing and often trampling on the rights of Christian communities. Social tensions and government hostility make Egypt a challenging place for Copts and other Christian groups, who collectively make up about 10% to 15% of the population in a mostly Muslim country. Though Christianity has existed in the country since the first century, the church has long faced opposition from the government at the national level and social ostracization locally.

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IRAN

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC): Described as the ideological custodian of Iran's 1979 revolution, the IRGC has long persecuted ethnic and religious minorities both inside of Iran and out. The group combines political, economic, and military power in a unique way and, reporting directly to Iran's Supreme Leader, wields enormous influence in the Iranian system.¹ The IRGC operates independently of the rest of the armed forces and carries a broad mandate that includes monitoring churches around the country.

Guidance Patrol: Also known as the Morality Police, Iran's Guidance Patrol is tasked with ensuring adherence to the regime's fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic law. The Guidance Patrol is staffed by a force numbering at least in the thousands, with reports that specific operations in the capital city of Tehran alone have included up to 7,000 undercover officers.² The scale of its operation is seen in the number of those affected. There have been as many as 3.6 million warnings in a single year from the Guidance Patrol to women wearing the hijab improperly, according to Iranian police.³

Ministry of Justice: Central to Iran's persecution of Christians and others, the Ministry of Justice is a carefully honed tool for the eradication of any internal dissent. The regime considers any form of independent thought — political, religious, or otherwise — a threat to its hegemony and is swift to indict Christians on trumped-up national security charges. There is little due process in the Iranian judicial system, and those accused are often subject to the worst kinds of treatment while in custody.

Evin Prison: Though far from the only prison of its kind in Iran, Evin Prison is notorious for its systematic mistreatment of political and religious prisoners. The U.S. government has sanctioned Evin for these abuses, but prison authorities continue to perpetrate them with a chilling disregard for human rights. Reports of torture, lack of medical care, and other mistreatment abound among survivors, who also indicate that political and religious prisoners are routinely singled out for mistreatment.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei: Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, has helped perpetuate a system that utterly disregards human rights and the right of his people to live according to the dictates of their conscience. He has held power since shortly after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, first as president from 1981 to 1989 and then as supreme leader from 1989 to today. His long tenure has cemented his power in Iran and established him as one of the most powerful authoritarian dictators in the world.

Khamenei is bitterly hostile toward the West and any perceived Western influence in Iran and has promised the eradication of the Jewish state of Israel. While Iran does recognize a limited role for Christians in the country, largely ceremonial and as a nod to their historic presence, Khamenei has worked vigorously to stop the spread of Christianity and strictly enforces the country's blasphemy and anti-conversion laws in an unsuccessful bid to halt their evangelistic endeavors.



"EVEN AS CHRISTIANITY CONTINUES TO GROW IN IRAN, THE THEOCRATIC REGIME RULING THE COUNTRY TODAY SHOWS FEW SIGNS OF EASING ITS BLOODY CAMPAIGN AGAINST CHRISTIANS AND OTHER RELIGIOUS MINORITIES."

-ICC STAFFER

STATE DEPARTMENT STATUS

COUNTRY STATUS

TRAVEL ADVISORY

SWL

CPC

2023 COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

LEVEL 1 LEVEL 2 LEVEL 3 LEVEL 4

DO NOT TRAVEL to Iran due to the risk of terrorism, civil unrest, kidnapping, arbitrary arrest of U.S. citizens, and wrongful detention. (State Department, as of Aug. 4, 2024).

PERSECUTION MEASURES

RADICAL ISLAM & EXTREMISM

One of the world's few theocracies, the Iranian system is built on extreme devotion to a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. After the overthrow of the secular but authoritarian monarchy in 1979, Iran swung hard toward Islamist extremism and has continued that path with a growing security apparatus designed to suppress religious and political dissent in every corner of society.

The Constitution cements the supremacy of Islamic, or Sharia, law in Iran, declaring that Parliament may not pass any law contrary to Islam and establishing the Guardian Council, made up of 12 Shia clerics appointed by the supreme leader and the judiciary, as final arbiter on all legislative matters.⁴

ANTI-CONVERSION & BLASPHEMY LAWS

Iran enforces the death penalty for blasphemy or speaking ill of Islam or Muhammed. This crime, dictated by Sharia law, is written broadly and allows the Iranian regime to criminalize all religious opinion contrary to Islam. According to a ranking published by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Iran's blasphemy provisions run more contrary to international law than any other country in the world.

Proselytization by Christians is also strictly prohibited, with Article 500(2) of the penal code criminalizing "any deviant educational or proselytizing activity" that promotes a religion other than Islam, defining such activity as "making false claims in religious fields." Publicly stating one's belief in Christ over Islam's Allah is grounds for severe punishment, including death.

POLITICS

Iranian politics are a tightly choreographed affair designed to keep hardliners in power and promote the interests of the supreme leader. Popular uprisings, such as that following the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022, and the election of relatively moderate politicians, such as Masoud Pezeshkian in 2024, may suggest that the regime's control is not absolute. However, Ayatollah Khamenei has consistently suppressed dissent and maintained his grip on power.

Five of Parliament's 290 seats are reserved for members of various religious minorities, including three for Christians, one for Jews, and one for Zoroastrians in a nod to their historical presence in the country. Every other seat in Parliament, along with senior government, intelligence, and military positions is reserved for Muslims only, according to the U.S. Department of State.⁷

EDUCATION

The government requires that students study Shia theology, regardless of their religious sentiments, but does allow some degree of religious education for certain religious minorities. Even this access is limited, though, to students who can prove that their family belonged to a recognized religious minority group before the 1979 revolution. Everyone else is considered Muslim by default.

Religious education by minority groups is further limited by the country's blasphemy and anti-proselytization laws. Christians have run afoul of these laws for educational activity deemed, by government prosecutors, to have violated the penal code's prohibition on "educational activities for deviant beliefs contrary to the holy sharia."

PERSECUTION MEASURES CONT.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

Iran is notorious for arresting anyone who strays from its strict interpretation of Sharia law. Such is the radical nature of the regime that these arrests do not only affect religious minorities but also influence many Muslims who, for one reason or another, may not abide by the state's moral strictures. In many cases, these are women in public who do not wear the hijab according to the government's preference.

Though many may receive only a temporary detention or a warning from the Guidance Patrol, even these limited interactions can be deadly, as was the case for Mahsa Amini and several other high-profile victims of the regime's brutality. Iran's prison system is known for its brutal treatment of inmates, with those who survive reporting regular bouts of torture and routine mistreatment by guards.

WOMEN

The regime's treatment of women, particularly regarding its strict moral code for female behavior in public, has become a significant point of anger among the Iranian people and the cause of high-profile protests. From rules barring women from appearing in public alone to strict guidelines on exactly how one must wear the hijab, the government has sought to regulate every aspect of life for its female citizens along moral lines.

After claiming to disband the Guidance Patrol in December 2022 in response to the demands of protesters — the group was the public face of the government's attempts to control women — the regime reintroduced the feared organization just seven months later in July 2023. Though the mass unrest over Iran's mistreatment of women has died down for now, reports suggest that the people's discontentment continues to grow under the surface.

ICC NEWSROOM

Iranian Authorities Again Charge Active House Church Member May 3, 2024

On March 11, Iranian authorities charged house church member Shabeddin "Shahab" Shahi with "propaganda against the Islamic regime." Shahi recently appeared at a Revolutionary Court in Karaj and is awaiting a second and final hearing at the sixth branch of the court.

Shahi served four months in prison in 2019 on the same charge. Authorities re-arrested him in December 2023, along with fellow house church members Milad Goodarzi and Alireza Nourmohammadi. Goodarzi and Nourmohammadi, as well as Nourmohammadi's brother, Amir Nourmohammadi, have previously served time in prison for their Christian faith.

The Nourmohammadi brothers, as well as another house church member, Hossein Sha'bani, have also been charged with engaging in propaganda against Islam as part of Article 500, a controversial amendment to Iran's penal code.

Multiple other families associated with the house church have been interrogated for their Christian activities since Shahi's in December.

ICC has spent years documenting similar cases in Iran, where Christianity is spreading rapidly.

Christian Prisoner Denied Medical Care in

Iran April 30, 2024

Mina Khajavi, a 60-year-old Christian convert serving a six-year prison sentence in Iran, is currently being deprived of necessary medical attention within Tehran's Evin Prison.

Despite suffering from arthritis and walking with a limp caused by an untreated broken ankle sustained in a car accident shortly before her imprisonment, Khajavi is being denied medical care by Iranian guards. This neglect has resulted in significant suffering for Khajavi, particularly as she must put pressure on her injured ankle when climbing to the second level of her bunk bed in her cell.

Agents with Iran's Revolutionary Guard arrested Khajavi in part of a string of coordinated raids against house churches in June 2020. Authorities charged Khajavi with "acting against national security by promoting 'Zionist' Christianity," and she began serving her sentence at the beginning of this year. Khajavi was arrested alongside several Christian converts, including Malihe Nazari and Joseph Shahbazian, both of whom have had their sentences reduced due to retrials — hope that Khajavi clings to as she seeks a retrial of her own.

Despite Government Persecution, the Iranian Church Grows July 24, 2023

Escalating civil unrest in Iran has led to intensifying governmental pressure on Christians. Increasingly stricter laws concerning the hijab, which could land those "encouraging lax hijab" up to 10 years in prison for "moral corruption," have sparked furious protests, leading to brutal repression through deadly force by the government.

However, despite the intense pressure, Iranian Christians are finding ways to resist oppression and spread the gospel. Iran has one of the fastest-growing churches in the world. Many Christians have supported the ongoing protests against the Iranian government.

Iran's Morality Police Resurface, Reigniting Protests July 20, 2023

On July 16, Iran's infamous morality police resurfaced for the first time since December 2022, reigniting the firestorm of protest from Iranian women and human rights and religious freedom activists.

The morality police, or the Gasht-e-Ershad, is a branch of the Iranian police tasked with enforcing Islamic dress code, particularly the correct wearing of the hijab. Iranian clerical rulers have contended that the hijab is an essential part of Islamic culture and that refusing to wear it is a sign of corruption and Western decadence.

Earlier this year, government officials contended that wearing the hijab is an Islamic and family virtue, displaying banners with images of women in acceptable hijabs and emblazoned with the motto "Hijab is the legacy of mothers."

ICC @ WORK

ICC conducts U.S.-based advocacy regarding human rights in Iran.

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

REPORTS SUMMARY OF FINDINGS



State Department

Iran 2023 International Religious Freedom Report One of only six theocracies in the world, religion and politics are deeply intertwined in Iran. Its constitution, finalized soon after the 1979 revolution, is a religious manifesto that quotes the Quran extensively and mandates the military to fulfill "the ideological mission of jihad in Allah's way; that is, extending the sovereignty of Allah's law throughout the world." For Christians, there is no escape from the extremist policies of a government fueled by an extremist interpretation of Shia Islam that leaves no room even for Sunni Islam, much less religious minorities like Christianity.

Western governments have struggled to instigate meaningful improvements for Iran's religious minority population. Though the United States and others regularly highlight the issue, the United States does not maintain diplomatic relations with Iran and is limited in the direct influence it can have on the topic. Iran is already heavily sanctioned on account of its broader military and human rights issues, negating one potential potent avenue of pressure from the United States.

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 issue. Though still a tiny part of the population, Iranian Christians are proving resilient to the government pressure that surrounds them every day.

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SAUDI ARABIA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Specialized Criminal Court: Founded in 2008 as a way for the royal family and its government to address terrorism, the Specialized Criminal Court has become a tool to eliminate all opposition to the government, both real and imagined. The court is often used to target religious minorities, who are viewed as inherently suspect from the perspective of national security.

According to a report by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, the Specialized Criminal Court is known to impose harsher sentences than other courts in Saudi Arabia's judicial system and regularly disregards the basic tenets of justice and due process. Confessions are sometimes obtained through torture, defendants are often held for prolonged periods without charges, and judges routinely deny defendants access to legal representation during trials and sentencing.¹

Mabahith: The secret police agency of the powerful Presidency of State Security, the Mabahith is known as an abusive and murderous force. The Presidency of State Security, created in 2017, combines the country's counterterror and domestic security services into a single agency to enforce the ruling family's political power over any form of opposition.

While the Mabahith is supposed to turn those it arrests over to the courts for trial, it operates a network of prisons where it holds prisoners for interrogation and torture. Reports indicate that the Mabahith, which has existed in some form since the early 1900s, has long targeted Christians and other religious minorities.²

Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV): As part of its efforts to impose Sharia law in the country, the Ministry of Interior operates the CPVPV to monitor behavior for adherence to Islamic standards.³ CPVPV officers reportedly focus their patrolling efforts on mosques and other religious sites rather than the general public, as their counterparts in Iran do, and are responsible for reporting potential violators to local law enforcement officials.

STATE DEPARTMENT STATUS

COUNTRY STATUS

CONCERN

CPC

2023 & 2024 COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR

TRAVEL ADVISORY

VEL 1 LEVEL

LEVEL 3 LEVEL

EXERCISE INCREASED CAUTION in Saudi Arabia due to the threat of missile and drone attacks from Yemen and terrorism. Be aware of risks concerning social media activity and importation of prohibited items. Some areas have increased risk. (State Department, as of Sept. 9, 2024).



"DESPITE SPORADIC ATTEMPTS
TO PROVE OTHERWISE, THE SAUDI
ARABIA'S THEOCRATIC FORM OF
GOVERNMENT LEAVES NO SPACE FOR
CHRISTIANITY OR EVEN THE MOST
BASIC OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOMS."

-ICC STAFFER

PERSECUTION MEASURES

RADICAL ISLAM & EXTREMISM

Saudi Arabia is governed as a theocratic monarchy and has created an entire system of government based on a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. The Hanbali school of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence predominates in the country, and Shia Muslims are heavily persecuted for their differing beliefs about Islam, with the Saudi government regularly sentencing Shia citizens to death for non-violent crimes and offenses committed while minors.⁴

Much of Saudi Arabia's legal system is informal and not based on written law, which allows judges a great deal of leeway in sentencing and the enforcement of vague Islamic codes of morality. Though the country is beginning to codify its laws, this often results in a formalization of the extremism already found in the courts.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

Saudi Arabia criminalizes blasphemy — insulting Islam — and apostasy — leaving Islam for another religion — and punishes infractions with severity. Apostasy is punishable by death, though the government has not implemented this punishment for some time.⁵ Punishment for blasphemy can include floggings, long prison terms, and large fines.⁶

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. Yet this does not mean that the consequence of blasphemy is 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 rein to seek extraordinarily harsh punishments for relatively inconsequential actions.⁷

POLITICS

Under Saudi law, the country's constitution is the Quran and the Sunna, or teachings and practices of the Islamic prophet Muhammed. No other overarching document exists to establish the government or protect the rights of the people. The government is run by the royal house of all Saud, which has amassed untold wealth for itself by leveraging government control of the country's plentiful energy reserves.

As in many totalitarian and Islamic regimes, Christians and religious minorities are considered a threat to the preeminence of the state. In the case of Saudi Arabia, an Islamic theocracy, political opposition and disfavored religious views are treasonous and punished swiftly and severely.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

Saudi Arabia uses arrests and imprisonment as tools for the repression of those with differing political and religious views. Its secretive security services are known to take political opposition figures and religious minorities into captivity, subjecting them to degrading treatment, torture, rape, and even death. Survivors of these prisons tell of horrific conditions and degrading treatment by guards.

Detention by Saudi security services is often long and does not come with official charges, allowing officials to keep their prisoners indefinitely with no concern for their rights. For religious minorities in the country, the government's pattern of abuse against those who subscribe to a belief system other than Sunni Islam is chilling.

ICC @ WORK

ICC works to bring the issue of Saudi Arabia's religious repression to light through its reports and in meetings with policymakers.

USCIRF Releases Updated Report on Religious Freedom in Saudi Arabia

Oct. 11, 2021

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recently updated their annual report chapter on Saudi Arabia, stating their religious freedom conditions "remained poor despite some ongoing improvements" since 2020. Nevertheless, religious minorities, as well as some abiding Muslim citizens who decide to exercise their freedom of speech, continue to suffer from government mistreatment and persecution. The government persists in cracking down on freedom of religion, prohibiting Christians from praying and worshiping in public and constructing their houses of worship.

Saudi Arabia Lacks a Christian Church Building

June 18, 2021

Saudi Arabia recently launched Vision 2030, a plan to develop the country beyond oil dependence, though a strategic part is to promote a secular image in a culture historically marked by ultra-conservative Islam. Though foreign Christians and a number of Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) live in Saudi Arabia, Christians cannot publicly practice their faith and worship.

International organizations have pushed for a physical church building for a long time, though skepticism remains about the significance of a physical building. Foreign expatriates are the only Christians allowed to practice their faith, where natives to Saudi Arabia must keep their faith a secret from ultra-conservative families, like the MBB ICC previously reported on.

Including religious tolerance in Vision 2030 would be a beneficial aspect for Saudi Arabia's new and improved image. However, the promotion of secularism instead of Islam does not guarantee religious freedom for Christians or other religious minorities in the country.

Saudi Arabia Claims Modernization While Christians Still Persecuted

June 1, 2021

Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman is taking steps towards implementing a modernized society called Vision 2030. Reportedly, this includes the removal of exclusive signage nearing Madinah and incorporating other religious teachings into the school curriculum.

The road towards Madinah used to read "Muslims Only." Now the sign has been changed to say "Haram Area," a change that many of the younger generations praised in Saudi Arabia as steps towards inclusion, tolerance, and modernized society. In Madinah, only Muslims are allowed within Nabawi Square where Islam's second holiest site is located, the Prophet's Mosque. No official statement has been made by the royal family regarding the updates.

As part of Vision 2030, school curriculum reportedly include Hindu epics. However, notably absent is rhetoric teaching or accepting Christianity or Shiite Islam. In an ultra-conservative Sunni Islam culture, Vision 2030 gives Saudi Arabia an opportunity to become tolerant of all religions.

REPORTS



State Department

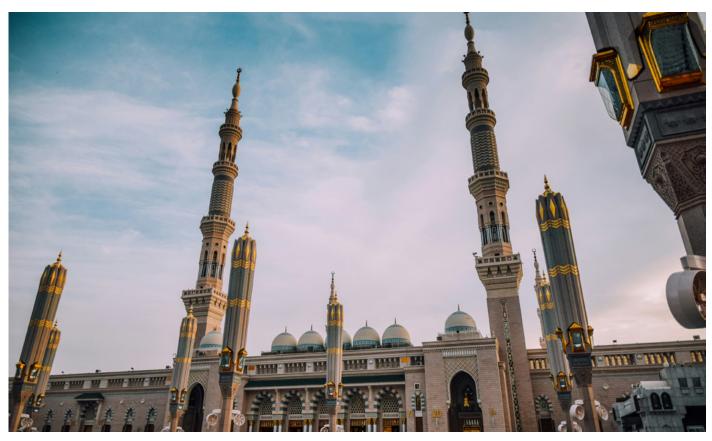
Saudi Arabia Human Rights Report



USCIRF

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





Nabawi Mosque in Madina, Saudi Arabia. Unsplash / Yasmine Arfaou

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Despite occasional attempts to whitewash its record on religious freedom, Saudi Arabia is unflagging in its efforts to elevate Islam over all other beliefs. A network of laws, many uncodified because they are based on nebulous Sharia law, relegate non-Muslim citizens to second-class status and prohibit blasphemy, a crime that essentially prevents 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 Muhammed, leaving few limits on the monarchy's power to rule as it chooses.

Though there were steps made in 2022 to codify the law, it remains largely unwritten, allowing for arbitrary and unchecked legal attacks on religious minorities. The judicial system perpetuates this system of repression and is carefully managed by the monarchy to ensure that religious dissent is swiftly and rigorously punished.

Systematic purges of judges and their replacement by more radical justices could be "impacting ongoing legal cases against religious minorities and dissenters," according to a USCIRF report. "Beginning in the summer of 2022, Saudi courts began issuing egregiously long prison sentences against dissidents — including religious dissidents — who peacefully expressed their beliefs."

Saudi Arabia manages to continue its system of extremism and repression in large part because its vast energy reserves make it an indispensable player on the international stage. Needful as Saudi Arabia's resources may be, though, the international community cannot afford to ignore its blatant violations of human rights. It should renew its efforts to push back on Saudi Arabia's repression of religious minorities.

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NICARAGUA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Ministry of Interior: Responsible for regulating nonprofit and religious institutions, Nicaragua's Ministry of Interior has emerged as a potent tool for the repression of religion. To operate legally in the country, religious organizations must obtain approval from the Ministry of the Interior and jump through many hoops. The ministry keeps a tight grip on religious groups' internal affairs, with special rules for visits by foreign religious figures and missionaries.

In recent years, the Ortega regime has weaponized the ministry to crack down on hundreds of churches, aid groups, and other faithbased organizations. According to the U.S. Department of State, the Nicaraguan government "revoked the operating licenses of at least 315 faith-based nonprofit organizations: 233 organizations belonging to an evangelical denomination, 38 linked to the Catholic church, and 41 from other faith-based groups" in 2023. In many cases, the government seizes the banned organization's assets.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Daniel Ortega: Leader of Nicaragua from 1979 to 1990 and president again from 2007 to today, Ortega has led the country down a path of increasing authoritarianism and animosity toward the Christian church, both Catholic and evangelical. Under changes to the Constitution enacted by Ortega in 2014, there is no term limit on the presidency, allowing Ortega to continue his rule indefinitely. In the time since, he has overseen staged elections that have further solidified his grip on power.²

Ortega has led the country's newfound antagonism toward the church, which he sees as subversive to his claim to absolute power. Nicaragua's population is predominantly Christian, with about 50% in the Catholic church and 33% as part of an evangelical denomination. Despite this and Ortega's claim to the Roman Catholic faith, he has led the government in staunch opposition to the place of Christian institutions in society.



"LATIN AMERICA IS BECOMING A PERSECUTION HOTSPOT AS **DICTATORS LIKE NICARAGUA'S** DANIEL ORTEGA REFUSE TO SHARE POWER OR THE SPOTLIGHT WITH CHRIST."

-ICC STAFFER

STATE DEPARTMENT STATUS

COUNTRY STATUS



2023 COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1 LEVEL 2 LEVEL 3

RECONSIDER TRAVEL in to Nicaragua due to arbitrary enforcement of laws, the risk of wrongful detention, and limited healthcare availability. Exercise increased caution in Nicaragua due to crime. (State Department, as of Jan. 11, 2024)

PERSECUTION MEASURES

POLITICS

In 2019, as anti-government protests rocked the country, some Catholic churches chose to shelter student protesters 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 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.

Since returning to power in 2007, Ortega has not been reticent about his animosity toward political opposition. He regularly jails or disqualifies opposition candidates for various offices and has used a 2020 law to bar multiple parties. A Marxist-Leninist, Ortega has consistently worked to consolidate power but previously preferred using religion as a campaign tactic rather than opposing it. Today, however, he is waging an open war on religion and shows little sign of changing his ways.

EDUCATION

Along with other religious organizations, religious schools have been targeted en masse by Ortega's ministries of interior and education, which view them the same way they view the church more broadly. Despite recognizing the right of religious schools to exist under the law, the government has been relentless in its attacks against them.

In some cases, the government has arrested or expelled teachers and school administrators. In contrast, others have been confiscated and taken over by government officials who make it part of the public school system. In government-run schools, students study from curricula designed to promote "Christian, Socialist, and Solidarity" principles, according to the government.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

The government uses arrests, arbitrary detention, and forced exile to end voices of opposition from within its borders. These actions, though, are not limited to outspoken critics of the regime. Even simple parishioners have been arrested for holding a traditional Holy Week procession. The government dislikes these public displays of piety despite their long history in Nicaragua and the broader Latin American church.

Hundreds of people have been arrested for supposed opposition to the government, including dozens of priests and other leaders in the Christian church. While some are released, others continue to languish in prison or have been exiled from the country.

SURVEILLANCE

Speaking at the 2024 IRF Summit in Washington, D.C., an annual event co-sponsored by International Christian Concern, an anonymous Nicaraguan priest explained how the government uses surveillance to control and intimidate members and leaders of the church. He was arrested, beaten, and imprisoned for months before he escaped the country. His family in Nicaragua is left to live with police parked outside their home, watching their every move.

This type of surveillance is increasingly common in Nicaragua where, according to the priest, "every Sunday, patrol cars full of police are parked in front of the country's Catholic churches" and "the faithful who attend the Eucharist on Sundays are photographed [and] the homilies delivered by the remaining priests are being recorded." This type of surveillance regime is strikingly like that imposed by China on its religious communities. Nicaragua keeps a close relationship with China, which it sees as an important ally in the face of increasing sanctions from the West and a struggling economy.

13 Mountain Gateway-Affiliated Personnel **Released after Nearly 9 Months in Prison**

Sept. 5, 2024

After months of diplomatic negotiations between the United States and Nicaraguan governments, 11 Nicaraguan pastors and two attorneys affiliated with Mountain Gateway, a Texas-based ministry, were released from prison today.

"This is the day we have prayed and believed God for," Jon Britton Hancock, founder of Mountain Gateway, said in a statement. "These pastors and attorneys have suffered greatly for the sake of the Gospel, but it has not been in vain. The Kingdom of God is advancing because of their persecution. Today, we cry tears of joy because our brothers and sisters are free!"

The 13 Mountain Gateway-affiliated prisoners were among 135 "unjustly detained political prisoners" released today through a deal arranged by the U.S. government, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said in a statement.

"No one should be put in jail for peacefully exercising their fundamental rights of free expression, association, and practicing their religion," Sullivan added.

Nicaragua to Begin Taxing Tithes, Shutters Christian Organizations Aug. 30, 2024

Nicaraguan lawmakers recently removed various tax exemptions from churches, subjecting them to pay taxes on tithes and offerings received from individuals.

Religious institutions will now become part of the "general tax regime," according to local newspaper La Prensa, and pay between 10% and 30% income tax on tithes. The move forces churches to reassess operations and is likely to sharply stifle their activities.

The day after the government passed the tax legislation, it closed 1,500 nongovernmental organizations, 678 of which were organizations tied to the Catholic church and evangelical Christian denominations. The regime claimed the organizations didn't properly document their financial reports. This is an allegation the government has used many times in the past.



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

6 Women Detained or Imprisoned in Nicaragua's Crackdown on Christians

Aug. 16, 2024

During the last year, six Christian women have been imprisoned in Nicaragua for their religious activities. Among them are five Catholics, namely María Asunción Salgado, Evelyn Guillén, Adela Tercero, Gabriela Morales, Maricarmen Espinosa Segura, and one Protestant, Marisela de Fátima Mejía Ruiz.

María Asunción Salgado was arrested on Oct. 7, 2023. Salgado and two other individuals were detained for "religious belief, activity, and association" as they attended a religious ceremony in Nuestra Señora de Asuncion parish, part of the Diocese of Estelí, Nicaragua.

New Report on Religious Freedom Reveals Christians Targeted in Nicaragua

June 28, 2024

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today released a new report on religious freedom violations perpetrated by the Nicaraguan government against

In its report, USCIRF details the authoritarian regime's persecution of Catholic and Protestant Christians within the nation.

"Nicaragua's government continues to repress the Catholic Church for its human rights advocacy by arbitrarily arresting, imprisoning, and exiling clergy and laypeople and shuttering and seizing the property of Catholic charitable and educational organizations," the assessment states. "As [President] Ortega and [Vice President] Murillo seek to maintain their hold on power, the authorities have been using similar tactics to oppress Protestant denominations."

President Daniel Ortega's War on the Catholic Church April 15, 2024

In recent years, the Catholic church in Nicaragua has been under assault by President Jose Daniel Ortega's regime. Before 2018, when pro-democracy protests erupted in Nicaragua, the government recognized clergy members' freedom of conscience and role as respected religious authorities for most Nicaraguans. In fact, during the protests, President Ortega enlisted the church to mediate between his government and those seeking his ouster. But, as the church became a refuge for those engaging in nonviolent action and some clergy criticized the government's increasingly dictatorial actions, Ortega came to view the church as an enemy.

ICC @ WORK

ICC covered two months of housing and food expenses for the families of 11 evangelical pastors who were imprisoned by Daniel Ortega's regime in Nicaragua. The pastors from Mountain Gateway ministry were released in September after intervention from U.S. Congressional leaders and the U.S. Department of State. The pastors were flown to Guatemala as refugees where ICC and other organizations continued to support and advocate for them.

ICC's Advocacy team worked closely with the International Republican Institute at the 2024 International Religious Freedom Summit to draw attention to persecution in Nicaragua and Latin America. IRI sponsored the session on "Concerning Trends in Latin America" that included heartwrenching testimony from survivors and experts.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

As is the case in many communist countries, Nicaragua has come to see religion as an enemy of the state. Religion, in the communist ideology, is a competing loyalty and creates institutions that amass loyal followings. This is dangerous to communist leaders because their continued power relies on their ability to carefully control every corner of society. Independent media, internet access, and the church pose an existential threat to their rule.

Nicaragua differs from many communist and socialist countries in that it has a long history of openness to the church and is deeply culturally influenced by Christianity. Unfortunately, this reality has not been enough to protect the Nicaraguan church from communist attacks and, perhaps, has made the situation worse by highlighting to the government how powerful the church can be in the lives and perspectives of citizens.

Though Nicaragua has only begun to persecute the church relatively recently, the severity with which it has waged its campaign against the church has created concern around the world. The pope used his widely watched New Year's address from the Vatican to condemn the Ortega regime for its ongoing and severe persecution of the Catholic church.

The U.S. Department of State added Nicaragua to its 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.

The latter designation shows increased concern about religious freedom in Nicaragua and normally carries certain legislatively mandated consequences in the form of sanctions.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) began including Nicaragua in its report in 2020, recommending that it be added to the SWL and then upgrading its recommendation to the CPC list in 2023.

Arguing for its CPC recommendation in a 2024 report, USCIRF noted that "religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua worsened significantly" in 2023 and condemned intensified efforts to "arbitrarily arrest, imprison, and expel Catholic clergymen and laypeople."

REPORTS



State Department

Nicaragua 2023 Human Rights Report



USCIRF

Nicaragua Country Update

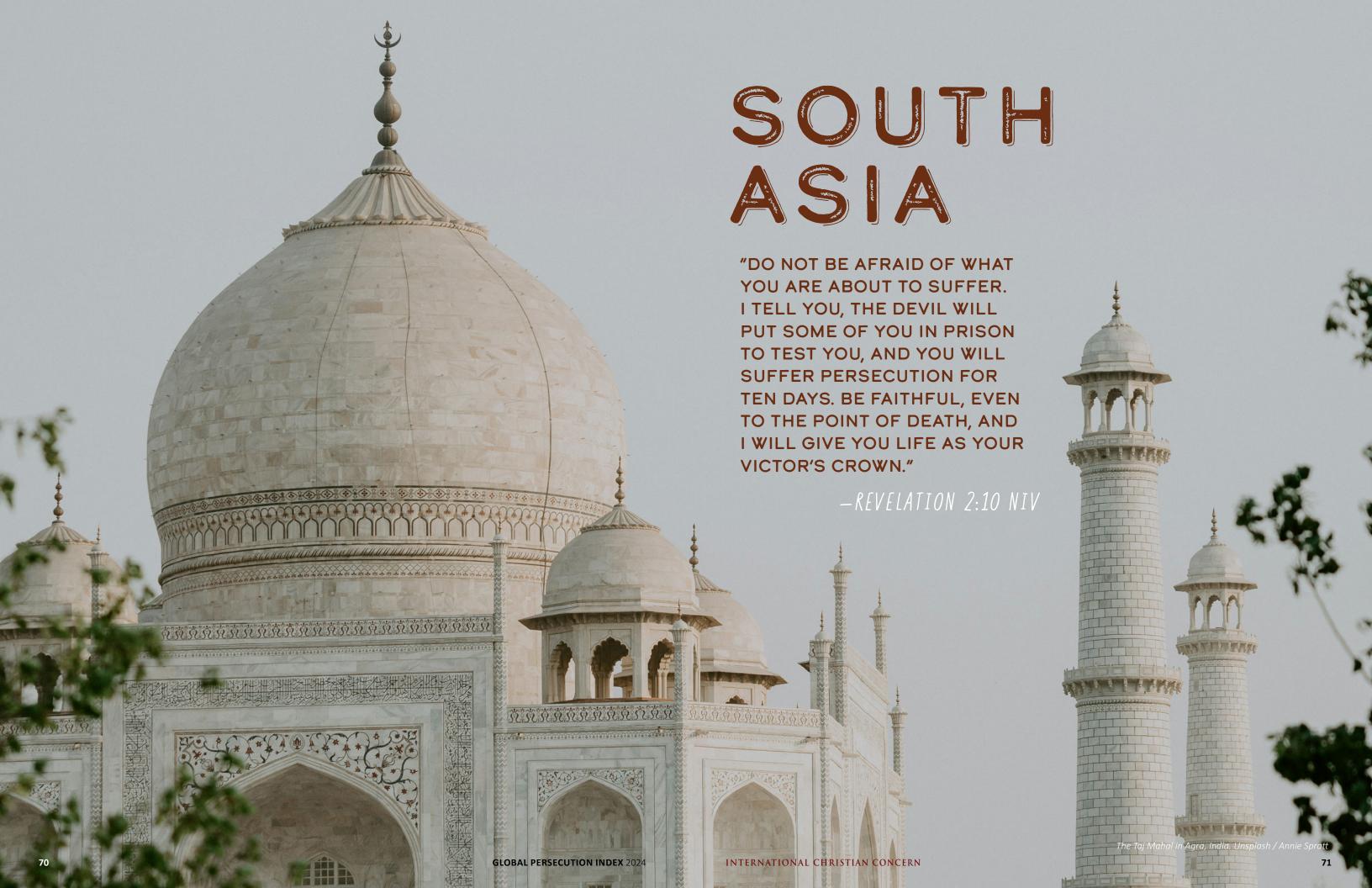


Human Rights Watch

World Report 2024: Nicaragua

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SOUTH AS A

ISSUES AND TRENDS IN SOUTH ASIA

to laws changing the definition of national citizenship, the many manifestations of religious nationalism in South Asia are working together to pressure and eliminate violence against religious minorities. vulnerable pockets of religious diversity across the region. Hindu nationalists in India escalate their aggression while onlooker nationalist politicians in Nepal learn from their neighbors and push for a return to a Hindu state.

Religious nationalism, in the South Asian context, includes the idea that identification with the majority's religion is necessary for full access to rights and a proper place in society. In India, for example, non-Hindus are treated as second-class citizens, kicked out of social welfare programs, and sometimes excluded from citizenship. To be truly Indian, Hindu nationalists argue, is to be Hindu. Similar ideological movements are visible in nearby countries, including Pakistan and Nepal.

CHRISTIANS AND MARGINALIZATION

As these exclusionary movements grow, Christians in countries across the region have come to occupy an increasingly limited place in society. From educational opportunities to job prospects, South Asian society seems to have left them little

Other laws and social practices further limit Christians. From laws protecting cows, which are considered sacred in Hinduism, to social pressures that sometimes force converts to leave their homes, non-Hindus are frequently pushed to the bottom rungs of society rather than viewed as equals. Many Christians have found their businesses boycotted by locals who disapprove of their faith.

INDIA'S NATIONALIST MOVEMENT

India's nationalist movement is robust. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has ruled India since 2014. It is the political arm

promangry mobs livestreaming their attacks on Christians of an aggressively nationalistic paramilitary organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, leads the party and has long encouraged

> More insidiously, the Indian welfare system is targeted at certain lower castes. Though the caste system has officially been abolished, this system uses castes to exclude indigent Christians, creating a powerful disincentive for conversion to Christianity and casting a fearful shadow over those who practice Christianity secretly.

THE PLIGHT OF CHRISTIANS IN PAKISTAN

In Pakistan, Christians make up 1.3% of the population but are disproportionately represented in the worst jobs. Postings for jobs cleaning the sewer by hand often include the caveat that Muslims need not apply as the positions are reserved for minorities. In other cases, Christians are preyed upon by the debt bondage industry and forced to work, sometimes for generations, under appalling conditions in brick kilns.

Pakistan also maintains blasphemy laws, used by the courts and unlawful mobs alike to enforce a hardline interpretation of Islam and intimidate Christians. The laws, which effectively ban the expression of non-Muslim religious beliefs, are draconian and have led to the deaths or imprisonment of many religious minorities. Christians live in constant fear that someone will falsely accuse them of blasphemy and a mob will form to abuse them. If they survive, they have the court to deal with and, for many, a death sentence.

THE THREAT OF RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

Religious nationalism is a deadly threat to religious freedom in South Asia. As it makes its way deeper into the political and social fabric of the region, religious minorities enjoy increasingly fewer social opportunities and political freedoms.

KEY CHALLENGES

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

The rise of Hindu nationalism in India and Islamic extremism in Pakistan and Afghanistan has led to increased discrimination and violence against religious minorities, particularly Christians.

BLASPHEMY LAWS

Strict blasphemy laws in Pakistan and some Indian states are used to target and persecute religious minorities, often leading to violence and imprisonment.

FORCED CONVERSIONS

In countries like Pakistan, Christian women and girls are particularly vulnerable to forced conversions and marriages.

SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION

Christians in South Asia often face social discrimination, including ostracism, job discrimination, and restrictions on marriage and property ownership.

LACK OF LEGAL PROTECTION

Weak law enforcement and a lack of political will to protect religious minorities have emboldened extremist groups.

WAYS TO RESPOND

INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY

Encourage targeted sanctions against individuals and entities involved in religious persecution, and lobby international organizations like the U.N. to pressure governments to protect religious freedom.

DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENT

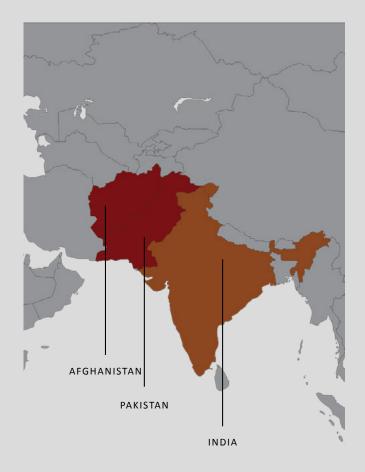
Engage with governments in South Asia to urge them to implement reforms that protect religious minorities and promote interfaith dialogue and understanding.

HUMANITARIAN AID

Provide humanitarian assistance to persecuted communities, including food, shelter, and medical care. Support legal aid and counseling services for victims of religious violence.

CAPACITY BUILDING

Empower local civil society organizations to advocate for religious freedom and human rights. Training religious leaders and community members on peacebuilding and conflict resolution.



AREA OF FOCUS

AFGHANISTAN

Under Taliban rule, Afghanistan has become one of the most dangerous places for Christians, with strict Sharia laws, violence, and forced conversions posing severe threats.

INDIA

Rising Hindu nationalism, discriminatory laws, and mob violence threaten the religious freedom of Christians and other religious minorities in India.

PAKISTAN

Pakistan's strict blasphemy laws and social discrimination against Christians, coupled with extremist violence, create a perilous environment for religious minorities.

For a full list and explanations of persecution zones, visit page 8.

AFGHANISTAN

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

The Taliban: After two decades of freedom under a secular, U.S.-backed government, Afghanistan fell to the Taliban in 2021 following the withdrawal of U.S. troops and the ensuing collapse of the secular Afghani government. Despite lip service to human rights and promises of reform, the Taliban now employs the same fundamentalist fervor that marked its rule in the late 1990s. The last three years of Taliban rule have seen dramatic turns for the worse for Christians, religious freedom, and the rights of women and children.

Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K): Since the territorial defeat of the Islamic State group in 2019, the jihadist group has reorganized as a loose conglomerate of terrorist cells across the Middle East and Africa. ISIS-K, most active in Afghanistan and Pakistan, has emerged as one of the most dangerous affiliates in the network and has staged numerous successful attacks not only in Afghanistan and Pakistan but as far as Russia.¹ While politically opposed to the Taliban, the Islamic State group helps it to perpetuate an environment of fear and repression for Christians and other religious minority groups.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Hibatullah Akhundzada: Akhundzada serves as the supreme leader of Taliban-run Afghanistan. A judge in the Sharia courts when the Taliban ran the country from 1996 to 2001, the choice of Akhundzada as supreme leader underscores the Taliban theocracy's current ideological fervor.

He is known as a staunch defender of Islamic fundamentalism and of the Taliban's many decisions to suppress the rights of religious minorities, women, and children. Under his leadership, Afghanistan's independent judiciary has been eliminated and replaced with a religious court system directly under the control of the supreme leader and fully empowered to enforce Sharia law with torture, floggings, and even the death penalty.²



STATE DEPARTMENT STATUS

COUNTRY STATUS

EPC

TRAVEL ADVISORY

THE TALIBAN — ENTITY OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

DO NOT TRAVEL to Afghanistan due to terrorism, risk of wrongful detention, civil unrest, kidnapping and crime. (State Department, as of July 29, 2024)

LEVEL 4

PERSECUTION MEASURES

RADICAL ISLAM & EXTREMISM

The Taliban enforces, albeit haphazardly, an extremist interpretation of Islamic Sharia law that restricts the rights of religious minorities and imposes a strict moral code on Afghan citizens regardless of their religious convictions.

As its ideological underpinning, radical Islam flows through every aspect of Taliban rule and deeply affects every citizen, Christian or not. Religious minorities are not the only ones affected by the Taliban's radical take on Islam — moderate Muslims suffer as well. The Taliban views them as enemies of a righteous Islamic state.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

As is common under Sharia law and practice, the Taliban-run judicial system in Afghanistan strictly prohibits blasphemy — speaking ill of Islam or its leaders. Blasphemy is a notoriously nebulous crime and gives authorities free rein to criminalize all disfavored religious thought. From the basic tenets of Christianity to even the principles of moderate Islam, Afghanistan's blasphemy laws allow the regime to punish religious dissenters swiftly and harshly.

The Sharia courts under Taliban rule also prohibit apostasy or leaving Islam for another faith. Apostasy, like blasphemy, is a crime punishable by death. With the punishment for sharing or accepting the Christian faith being death, these laws have a chilling effect on religious minorities in the country, forcing them to operate with utmost secrecy and making the full practice of their religion all but impossible.

POLITICS

The Taliban operates without domestic political opposition. No political party is positioned to threaten its grasp on power, which was taken militarily in the first place. This political environment allows the Taliban to operate with impunity.³

While the international community has made efforts to pressure and punish the Taliban for its abysmal record on human rights, these efforts have — so far — had negligible effect. Sanctions are no new development for the Taliban, and while the country suffers because of them, top Taliban leaders live with relative ease. The Taliban government has yet to be recognized internationally. Still, it remains to be seen whether the international community holds that line for as long as the Taliban continues its rights violations.

FDUCATION

Despite early claims of tolerance and moderation, especially toward women, the Taliban moved swiftly to restrict women's right to education and to kick girls out of school after taking power. In retrospect, the Taliban's promise to allow women access to education "within the bounds of Islamic law" meant a near complete ban on education altogether. Today, Afghan girls are only allowed a primary-level education.

The Taliban also barred women from teaching in schools, which has dramatically reduced the number and quality of teachers available to those left in school. Many schools are forced to make do with under-qualified male teachers or leave children with no teacher. The curriculum is also being revised to promote Islamic fundamentalism and hatred toward outside groups.⁴ The effects of these changes to Afghanistan's education system will be felt for generations, both socially and economically, as the country will struggle to produce the necessary talent pool to sustain development.







ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

The Taliban has proved to be less than capable of the task of governing and has failed to introduce a comprehensive, nationwide legal, judicial, or penal system. As a result, Sharia law is haphazardly applied around the country, and local clerics exercise an outsized degree of influence on the application of the law.

Still, to the best of its ability, the Taliban has imposed a harsh version of Sharia law around the country and enforces it vigorously. Arbitrary arrests and detention, torture, floggings, and executions for violations of the Taliban's moral code are unfortunately common. The decentralized method of enforcement only serves to exacerbate the fear imposed on Afghan citizens and Christians.

SURVEILLANCE

While the Taliban may lack the technical capabilities to surveil its citizenry effectively, it works rigorously to identify and stamp out any who might dare to challenge its vision. Reports from the country reveal that the Taliban awards bounties for turning Christians in to the authorities, turning the public into a mass tool for information and surveillance of the Christian community.

The Christian community in Afghanistan is, for the most part, made up of converts from Islam. This makes them particularly vulnerable, as apostasy is a clearly defined crime under Sharia law, and their departure from Islam is, in many cases, known to their local community.

WOMEN

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 it came to power in 2021 restrict the rights of women and girls.⁵ From education to employment to their ability to move about in public, the Taliban has worked to limit the rights of women in every area of life.

A generation of women and girls was raised under the American-supported secular government of 2001-2021 with access to education, jobs, and even government positions. These rights have been systematically stripped from them under the new Taliban government, with no end to the discrimination in sight.

ICC @ WORK REPORTS

When the Taliban regained power in 2021, ICC rapidly responded to the dire needs of persecuted Christians. We helped extract Christians from Afghanistan to neighboring countries and provided short-term assistance to those on the ground. We predicted the Taliban would take over and already had money in the country, which allowed us to act fast. Our resources have dwindled, however, and partners have gone missing. We are not currently working in Afghanistan and are directing funds to other countries.



Afghanistan **Humanitarian Brief** Situational Overview for Christian Minorities



State Department Afghanistan 2023 Human Rights Report



USCIRF Country Update:

Afghanistan 2024

ICC NEWSROOM

Christian Women Forced to Wear Islamic Dress in Afghanistan

Jan. 8, 2024

The Taliban's Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice has cracked down on women who fail to observe the strict dress code, starting last week. Dozens of women have been arrested in the streets of Kabul and taken to unknown locations. The spokesperson for the ministry referred to this as "bad hijab" and warned women they would continue tracking down those in violation of the rule.

This development comes on top of a multitude of restrictions Afghan women and girls are already facing, including restrictions on education, work, travel, and even healthcare. To be a Christian woman in Afghanistan would almost certainly bring a death sentence

Afghan Christians Isolated as Taliban **Celebrates 3 Years in Power** Aug. 14, 2024

The Taliban celebrated the third anniversary of its takeover of Afghanistan on Wednesday with a military parade at Bagram Airfield, once the largest U.S. military base in the country.

The Islamic extremist group seized Kabul on Aug. 15, 2021, after Afghanistan's U.S.-supported government collapsed and its leaders fled the country. The anniversary falls a day earlier on the Afghan calendar.

Following the Taliban's return to power, the religious and civil liberties Afghans had cherished for years rapidly deteriorated. Christians endured intense governmental and societal pressure and scrutiny. They faced regular raids on their homes and frequently received threats against their jobs and families. They also lost educational and economic opportunities.

Instability in Afghanistan Led to More Than 3,700 Civilian Casualties Since August 2021

Ongoing instability in Afghanistan led to 1,095 civilians killed and 2,679 wounded between August 2021 and May 2023, according to a report from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

The report highlighted "an increase in the lethality of suicide attacks since . . . with a smaller number of attacks causing a greater number of civilian casualties." More than 700 of the civilian deaths were caused by improvised explosive devices (IEDs) occurring in public places such as mosques, education centers, and commercial markets. The Islamic State (ISIS) was responsible for over 1,700 casualties. The Taliban government claimed that "security forces of the Islamic Emirate oblige themselves to ensure security of the citizens and take timely action on uprooting the

safe havens of the terrorists," in response to another U.N. report citing security concerns.

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan followed almost 20 years of a protracted counterinsurgency campaign against the Taliban as part of the global war on terrorism. The withdrawal followed the stipulations of an agreement signed in early 2020 that included commitments from the Taliban to negotiate with the Afghan government and to prevent al-Qaida and ISIS from establishing "safe haven" in the country.

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



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Christians and other religious minority communities in Afghanistan face layer upon layer of violence and discrimination for their identities. From the Taliban to local Muslim communities, the pressure to follow the Taliban's archaic interpretation of Islam is unrelenting. Afghans are also subject to terrorist attacks at the hands of the Islamic State group and are ostracized in a society with no place for religious dissent.

A land of many ethnic minorities, religious and ethnic identities often overlap in Afghanistan, compounding the difficulties faced by many and rendering the free practice of their faith in Afghanistan utterly impossible.

Largely cut off from international aid, few options exist for Afghan Christians or members of other communities, like the Bahai and ethnic Hazara. With fleeing not an option in many cases — and the destinations dangerous in and of themselves — many are forced to live in hiding, hoping for an end to Taliban rule and the cruel repression that it has brought.

CITATIONS

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- ³ https://freedomhouse.org/country/afghanistan/freedom-world/2024
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INDIA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM? HARM?

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP): While it suffered an unexpected electoral setback in the 2024 national elections and now rules as part of a coalition government, the BJP is still the leading political movement in the country and a powerful force for right-wing religious nationalism. It serves as the domestic political wing for the RSS and is known for championing a narrow view of Indian identity based on the idea that to be truly Indian is to be Hindu — a view that necessarily reduces Christians and religious minorities to second-class status.

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS): A paramilitary organization dedicated to an extremist ideology of Hindu supremacy and right-wing nationalism, the RSS acts as an ideological guardian for Hindutva political philosophy, which calls for Hindu hegemony over India. It boasts a membership in the millions and has spawned numerous organizations that operate worldwide, including the BJP political party within India and the VHP and HSS organizations internationally.

Radicalized Hindu Mobs: Much of the persecution happening around India begins at the hands of angry Hindu mobs. Fueled by reports, often fabricated, of supposed insults to Hinduism or its deities, these mobs attack Christian and Muslim communities with near-total impunity. In recent years, mobs have begun livestreaming their attacks, with some vigilantes developing significant social media followings of those scintillated by scenes of brutality and violence against religious minorities.



Yogi Adityanath: The chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Adityanath is a well-known Hindu firebrand and a leading figure in India's swing toward radical Hindu nationalism. "When I speak, thousands listen," he once told a crowd. "When I ask them to rise and protect our Hindu culture, they obey. If I ask for blood, they will give me blood. I will not stop until I turn Uttar Pradesh and India into a Hindu Rashtra," referring to a popular Hindutya concept comparable to the radical Muslim idea of a widespread Islamic caliphate.

Under Adityanath's watch, Uttar Pradesh adopted an anticonversion ordinance in 2020. Since being ratified by the legislature in 2021, it has swiftly turned the state into one of the most dangerous places for Christians in India by empowering mobs to attack people of faith. According to civil society leaders interviewed by ICC, more than 230 people have been jailed under the law since 2021, and the number continues to climb almost daily.

Narendra Modi: Since taking office in 2014, Modi has led India in a starkly nationalistic direction, quashing the rights of Christians, Muslims, and other religious minorities as he promotes a narrow view of India as a solely Hindu state. Under Modi's leadership, several states have promulgated discriminatory laws limiting religious expression and emboldening mobs to attack peaceful worshipers without consequence.2

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.

"VIRULENT HINDU NATIONALISM IS STOKING FIRES OF LEGAL AND SOCIAL PERSECUTION ACROSS INDIA."

-ICC STAFFER

GLOBAL PERSECUTION INDEX 2024

STATE DEPARTMENT STATUS

COUNTRY STATUS

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1 LEVEL 2 LEVEL 3 LEVEL 4

USCIRF RECOMMENDS COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR CONCERN DESIGNATION EXERCISE INCREASED CAUTION in India due to crime and terrorism. Some areas have increased risk. (State Department, as of July 23, 2024)

PERSECUTION MEASURES

EXTREMISM

Persecution of religious minorities in India is fueled by extremists across government and society who view Hinduism as the core of what it means to be Indian, leaving little room in society for non-Hindus.³ Muslims are particularly targeted by these extremist groups for several reasons, including that they tend to dress more distinctly and often gather in larger numbers across India.

Patterns in Christian persecution often follow trends in Muslim persecution. Large-scale riots, for example, tended to mark anti-Muslim activity in the late 20th century and early 2000s and only more recently have begun to affect Christians in places such as Chhattisgarh and Manipur.4

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

Nearly half of India's 28 states have an anti-conversion law on the books. These laws, rooted in post-colonial fears of undue outside influence, are based on disinformation popular among Hindu nationalists — the idea that Christians and religious minorities are coordinating mass, demographic-shifting forced conversions to subvert the Indian way of life.

In fact, there is no evidence that this type of conspiracy exists despite thousands of legal cases searching for evidence. In practice, India's anti-conversion laws are so broadly phrased as to outlaw even the most basic practices of religious life, such as singing worship songs, gathering corporately, and benevolence. For the mobs, the laws give a veneer of legitimacy to their grievances and empower them to act with violence against innocent Christians.

POLITICS

Anti-minority sentiment in India is effectively channeled toward political action, with the BJP whipping up mass resentment toward Muslims and Christians and turning that resentment into an electoral mandate that allows them to enact discriminatory legislation. The BJP party platform necessarily includes a wide range of topics — personal subsidies and the economy are particularly salient issues for Indian voters — but core to its party identity is the issue of Hindu exceptionalism and the necessary restrictions on minorities that that worldview implies.

Emerging from the Spring 2024 national elections, however, the BJP found itself with a significantly reduced electoral mandate. It was forced to form a coalition with several other parties to assemble a government in Parliament. While the long-term implications of this change have yet to be fully understood, analysts expect that the BJP's nationalist agenda will be hampered by its coalition partners, which are significantly more secular.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

Leveraging their sweeping anti-conversion laws, state governments across India intimidate religious minorities by arresting them for supposedly engaging in the forced conversion of Hindus. After decades of these arrests, no Christian has ever been convicted of engaging in a forced conversion, and only one Muslim has been convicted despite thousands of trials.

In many cases, those accused of forced conversion were simply leading a church service or other similarly innocuous religious events when a mob attacked them and turned them into the police. While the utter lack of convictions demonstrates the baselessness of the charges, they come at great cost to the accused, who are detained for weeks or months and are forced to hire expensive legal counsel to represent them in court.

INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN 79

Hindu Nationalists Attack Church in Odisha Sept. 9, 2024

A pastor and several members of his church were beaten on Sunday as Hindu nationalists attacked a worship service in Odisha on Sunday, accusing the church of forcefully converting Hindus to Christianity.

Those who conducted the attack in the city of Bhubaneswar included members of the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS), the self-avowed protector of the Hindu religion, and Bajrang Dal, an RSS offshoot that is prone to violent attacks on minority communities.

According to reports, the church had recently rented a threestory building to conduct its worship services. After the RSS and Bajrang Dal learned that more than 100 people were attending the church's services, they decided to attack the church and make false allegations of forced conversions.

120 Christians Forced to Reconvert to Hinduism Aug. 6, 2024

Around 120 tribal Christians belonging to two villages in the Koraput district of India's eastern state of Odisha were forcefully reconverted to Hinduism on Sunday during a ceremony known as "ghar wapsi" or "homecoming."

The ghar wapsi ceremony includes Hindu and tribal rituals to "cleanse" former Hindus who had accepted Christ and wash away any remnants of the Christian faith. During these rituals, men often have their heads shaved. In some cases, radical Hindus have forced Christians to drink the blood of a chicken mixed with cow dung.

Just before the forced reconversions, local members of Vishwa Hindu Parishad Dharma Prasar, a fringe fundamentalist Hindu group, reportedly gathered at the temple where the ceremony occurred.

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

Family of Deceased Pastor Coerced to Re-Convert for Burial Aug. 30, 2024

When a Christian pastor died suddenly of a heart attack in a village in the Bastar district of India's Chhattisgarh state, his family was forced to re-convert to their former religion and pay a hefty fine to get him buried in his village.

Pastor Manju was an outspoken leader and a voice of Christian rights. He shepherded two churches in different villages. He lived with his wife, two sons and a daughter.

On Aug. 28, Manju suffered a heart attack and died before his family could take him to the hospital. The next morning, the family wanted to bury him with the help of the church members. Around 10 pastors arrived to offer condolences and conduct the funeral ceremony.

Nearly 1,700 Arrested in 4 Years under UP's Anti-Conversion Law Aug. 20, 2024

During the last four years, 1,682 people have been arrested, and 835 cases have been registered under the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act in the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Most of those arrested have been Christians, including pastors.

The Uttar Pradesh government, led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), began a fierce crackdown from 2020 onwards after bringing into force the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act.

This anti-conversion law is the most stringent and draconian as compared to other unlawful conversion of religion acts prevalent in nine other states across India.

Uttar Pradesh is led by Yogi Adityanath, an ascetic hardliner who has cracked down on minority communities in various ways.

According to a report, charges have been filed in 818 of the 835 cases registered under the anti-conversion law so far. However, according to a prominent law firm operating in North India (name withheld for security reasons), no one has been convicted under the anti-conversion law because there has never been a shred of hard evidence against the religious conversions.

"If there had been even a single conviction under the anticonversion law, the pro-government mainstream media would have tom-tommed about it all over the national media," Sahu Johar said.

He added that most of the arrests have been made under false or frivolous charges.

Meanwhile, authorities have reportedly said that the investigating officers would initiate action based on the evidence against anyone who has offered allurement, inducement, or adopted illegal means to carry out religious conversions.

ICC @ WORK

PERSECUTION RESPONSE TRAINING

Churches throughout India are asking our ICC to train them on how to respond to persecution. Our Persecution Response Training is designed to empower at-risk pastors to become their own advocates by increasing their awareness of how to address persecution from a legal perspective. We also offer hands-on guidance for managing persecution incidents in real-world scenarios. Ultimately, these pastors become trainers at the local level, exponentially increasing the number of pastors receiving the training.

HOPE HOUSE

In many countries where ICC works, Christians are considered second-class citizens. Christian children are often denied a quality education. Hope House provides these children with supplemental core classes, such as literature, social studies, and math, and faith enrichment courses like discipleship and Bible classes. Through these classes, Hope House offers Christian children hope for a better future. In India, where Christian communities are often spread out, ICC partners with local village churches to build a learning center on the church's property. One to two teachers instruct up to 40 children at each learning center. ICC has 10 learning centers in India.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Christians in India face significant hurdles, including legal structures that limit them economically and a judicial system that grants impunity to attacking Hindu radicals.

Under Modi's leadership, India has steadily declined in religious freedom. A 2024 U.S. Department of State report on India found that "attacks on members of religious minority communities, (including killings, assaults, and intimidation), occurred in various states [across India] throughout the year." A previous report discussed the issue of state-level laws that criminalize minority religious activity and highlighted "numerous reports during the year of violence by law enforcement authorities against members of religious minorities in multiple states."

The international community cannot ignore India's deteriorating religious freedom or its ongoing persecution of Christians. Despite India's economic and geopolitical influence on the international stage, it is important to hold the nation accountable for its human rights abuses.

CITATIONS

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REPORTS



Unchecked

The Rise of Hindu Nationalism, Legal Repression, and Mob Violence in the World's Largest Democracy



State Department

India 2023 Human Rights Report



USCIRF

Country Update: India October 2024

PAKISTAN

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Jamaat-e-Islami: The Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami party helps to perpetuate religious extremism in the national political discourse. In statements and speeches, members of Jamaat-e-Islami promote intolerance toward religious minorities. Legislatively, a party member introduced a bill in 2023 to expand the definition of blasphemy and increase punishments for the offense. As detailed elsewhere in this report, Pakistan's blasphemy laws are a major tool for the persecution of the country's small Christian minority.

Terrorist Groups: Throughout the country, the threat of Islamist terrorism looms large for religious minority communities. While some of the most active groups, like Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan and the Balochistan Liberation Army, focus mainly on antigovernment actions and work to seize territory from government control, others like ISIS-K have a broader focus. Together, they work to create an environment of fear that threatens religious minority communities around the country.¹

Local Extremists: Throughout the country, mobs of extremists gather to enforce their interpretation of Islamic law, often at the expense of minorities. In many cases, these mobs are emboldened by Pakistan's discriminatory blasphemy laws, which they interpret as justification for their violence. Police are often unable to respond to these mobs or even complicit in their actions. Afraid to incur the wrath of the mob, police sometimes respond to incidents hours later or allow mobs to lynch Christians in custody.2



"THE PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS IN PAKISTAN, WHETHER DUE TO BLASPHEMY OR FORCED CONVERSIONS, IS INCREASINGLY COMMON, AND IT OFTEN GOES UNPUNISHED. WHILE THE GOVERNMENT HAS PASSED LAWS. LIKE SECTION 498B IN THE PENAL CODE FOR FORCED CONVERSIONS, NO ONE HAS EVER BEEN PUNISHED UNDER THIS LAW. EVEN WHEN PROVEN GUILTY, SIMILARLY, IN BLASPHEMY CASES, JUSTICE HAS NEVER BEEN SERVED. PERSECUTION WILL CONTINUE TO INCREASE UNTIL THE PERSECUTORS ARE HELD ACCOUNTABLE UNDER THE LAW."

-ICC STAFFER

STATE DEPARTMENT STATUS

COUNTRY STATUS

CPC

2024 COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 3

RECONSIDER TRAVEL to Pakistan due to terrorism. Some areas have increased risk. (State Department, as of Sept. 10. 2024).

GLOBAL PERSECUTION INDEX 2024

PERSECUTION MEASURES

RADICAL ISLAM & EXTREMISM

Terrorist groups in Pakistan work to undermine and destabilize the country, often targeting government facilities or places of worship in their effort to gain territory and build an Islamic caliphate in the region. ISIS-K has grown into an international menace and has launched attacks in Pakistan, in neighboring Afghanistan, and as far as Russia.

Less organized extremism is, perhaps, an even larger threat to the country's religious minority communities. Mobs, sometimes numbering in the hundreds, attack churches, Christians, and others perceived to have affronted Islam. The accusation's validity seems to carry little weight for these mobs, which are increasingly forming throughout the country.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

Pakistan's blasphemy laws pose a severe threat to the country's religious minorities. As with blasphemy laws elsewhere, Pakistan's laws criminalize minority religious expression and provide authorities — and mobs, in Pakistan's case — with nearly unlimited impunity to attack Christians and 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.³ 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.

POLITICS

Pakistani society is highly stratified, with those at the bottom of society given little opportunity to advance. Religious minorities, including Christians, are typically at the bottom of the ladder and face myriad obstacles to advance. Among these obstacles is the lack of proper access to education. 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.

In government schools, the curriculum excludes and sidelines religious minorities, according to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. ⁴ The government is working to implement a single, nationwide curriculum that emphasizes the Islamic perspective, even on topics unrelated to religion, and uses divisive language to refer to minorities. Still, the government has taken some positive steps, including removing the requirement that religious minorities study Islam.⁵

REFUGEES & IDP CAMPS

When Afghanistan fell to the Taliban in 2021, many Afghans — including many religious minorities — fled to Pakistan. While Pakistan allowed them to enter, many were segregated and kept from opportunity in society. Though living in better conditions than under Taliban rule, these refugee communities often lacked the support they needed.

In recent years, popular sentiment has turned against these refugees, with many in the general population blaming them for increased terrorist attacks. As a result, the government has begun mass deportation. In total, the Pakistani government has deported about 1.3 million Afghan refugees back to Afghanistan. Many Hazara and Christians are among this number and are at particular risk from the virulently anti-minority Taliban.

ABDUCTION & FORCED LABOR

According to civil society groups working in the country, many women and girls are abducted, married off, and forced to convert to Islam. This trend has been ongoing for many years but has increased recently and is an unnerving threat for women and girls in these minority communities, especially as law enforcement often fails to respond adequately.

The brick kiln industry, largely staffed by indentured workers trapped in inescapable debt to the factory owners, is disproportionately made up of Christians and other minority groups. Sometimes multiple generations work their entire lives to pay off a debt of no more than a few hundred dollars. In one kiln that ICC visited in 2023, the workers were roughly 50% Christian — a grossly disproportionate share in a country where Christians make up just 1.2% of the population.

INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN

Christian Woman Sentenced to Death in Pakistan for Blasphemy Sept. 20, 2024

A Pakistani court on Wednesday sentenced a 40-year-old Christian mother to death for allegedly blaspheming the Islamic Prophet Muhammad.

Judge Muhammad Afzal Majoka sentenced Shagufta Kiran to death using Pakistan's strict blasphemy laws. Kiran's lawyers plan to appeal the decision.

"We feel it's a wrong judgment based on prejudice," Kiran's attorney, Rana Abdul Hameed, stated in a UCA news report. "The judge didn't bother to look at the evidence or conduct a proper analysis."

False Blasphemy Charge Leaves Christian Community Reeling Sept. 5, 2024

Yet another Christian community in Pakistan is in a state of fear following a local Muslim's false accusation of blasphemy.

On Aug. 27, a man named "Bugti" claimed a local Christian had burned a Quran in the Christian community of Gulshan-e-Mariam, Jam Kanda, Shah Latif Town, district Malir Karachi. Word of the incident spread, and tensions mounted until a Muslim mob formed on Aug. 30 and shouted threats. Nearly 40 of the more than 250 Christian families in the community fled, fearing violence. Members of the mob broke into those families' homes and stole their belongings.

"The situation of the area was very harmful, and the Muslims of the area included were angry, and some masked persons were ready for the attack," one person reported. "Luckily, all were saved after the statement of the man named Bugti, who saw the burnt Quran from a garbage canister near the Christian community's area."

Suspicious Fire Destroys Pakistan Church Before Easter Aug. 6, 2024

A Presbyterian Church in Pakistan was destroyed by fire in the early hours of Saturday, March 30.

The 3 a.m. blaze occurred in Gujar Khan, Rawalpindi.

Locals suspect arson because of a dispute between the church community and the owner of a neighboring plaza. The church had blocked a nearby road for security reasons on Easter weekend, causing tension.

Exploring the Lives of Women Laborers in Pakistan's Brick Kilns June 27, 2024

Amid the steady hum of chatter exists a silent symphony of suffering where women toil day and night to meet not only their brick guota, but their growing family's needs. Yet, as they labor every day to support their families in unforgiving heat, their own well-being fades into the background.

During what should be a beautiful and life-giving time for expecting mothers, these women consistently lack access to proper healthcare during their pregnancies. With each family working at the kilns averaging seven to nine children, women are constantly pregnant. But the emphasis for these mothers is placed on brick output — and their quota doesn't decrease when they're pregnant. Due to this, women's health suffers, and babies, if they live to full term, are often born with health complications.

ICC developed a comprehensive plan to address major issues at the brick kilns and is creating successful livelihood projects to keep families out of the kilns once their debts are paid off. One area of focus is women's health.

Pakistan Christian Dies 9 Days after Mob Attack June 4. 2024

About a week after suffering a brutal mob attack, Nazir Masih, who was in his 70s, died early Monday morning at a military hospital near Islamabad. His funeral service took place Tuesday at his family's home in Sargodha.

The mob attacked Masih on May 25 after claims that he had burned pages from a Quran circulated throughout the Mujahid colony in Gillwala, a predominantly Christian community in Sargodha. Masih suffered severe head trauma in the attack.

"He was a well-known, respectable, and industrious person in his area," an ICC staffer in Pakistan said. "He was running a small shoe-making factory and cosmetic shop. His family is a well-to-do

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



ICC @ WORK

BRICK KILNS: ICC staff has toured brick kilns in Pakistan and met with Christian families who labor in their deplorable conditions. We provide families that gain freedom from the kilns with auto rickshaws and other things that help generate income and obtain financial independence, so they never have to return to the kilns.

GENERATION TRANSFORMATION (GT): This education program helps break the cycle of persecution by offering opportunities to underprivileged Christian students and young professionals. GT participants may embark on a wide range of career paths, but those seeking to improve the status of Christians in the country are prioritized. GT seeks to keep young Christian adults in-country to bolster the talented Christian workforce.

ADVOCACY: Through its Fellows program, ICC published a report titled "Innocence Under Threat: The Impact of Blasphemy Laws on Minority Christian Children." This report exposes the harsh reality of Pakistan's blasphemy laws and the disproportionate effects they have on children who are part of a religious minority. We also feature several Pakistani Christians in our Prison Letter Writing Campaign.

Innocence Under Threat

UNDER THREAT

REPORTS

Examining the Impact of Blasphemy Laws on Minority Christian Children in Pakistan



State Department Pakistan 2023 Human Rights Report

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Pakistan's small Christian population has always been relegated to the outskirts of society. In cities around Pakistan, Christians are pushed to separate neighborhoods, or "ghettos." In the legal system, Christians are singled out by an array of laws that criminalize their faith and punish them severely for criticizing Islam. Even the accusation of blasphemy can lead to the death penalty, casting a severe chill over everyday interactions between Christians and their majority

Established as an Islamic republic in 1956, Pakistan openly favors Islam above all other faiths, both in official policy and throughout society. For the majority, this system is tolerable — the country is more than 96% Muslim — but for the small religious minority communities scattered across the country, the arrangement is stifling and threatening in the extreme.

In their interactions with the government, Christians and other minorities find themselves relegated to second-class status. The little attention they receive in the policymaking sphere is often negative, focused on ending their rights and stifling their views. Family and civil law do not consider their ways of living and create unequal burdens on the everyday lives of minority faiths. Registering one's conversion to Islam is a simple administrative process, but registering one's conversion away from Islam is not even a choice.

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The state of the s

"WHO SHALL SEPARATE
US FROM THE LOVE OF
CHRIST? SHALL TROUBLE OR
HARDSHIP OR PERSECUTION
OR FAMINE OR NAKEDNESS
OR DANGER OR SWORD?"

-ROMANS 8:35 NIV

SOUTHEAST ASIA

ISSUES AND TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

eligious freedom remains poor across most of eastern Asia. Whether it's authoritarian governments in China and North Korea, repression in Indonesia and Malaysia, or military rule in Myanmar, the challenges for Christians and others are numerous and growing. Chief among them is the region's movement toward authoritarianism.

ASIAN AUTHORITARIANISM AND COMMUNISM

Asian authoritarianism is frequently motivated by some form of communist ideology, which considers independent religious practice to be an existential threat to communist rule. China exemplifies this viewpoint, working rigorously to eliminate independent house churches and only allowing a handful of state-controlled religious institutions that it uses for propaganda.

The co-option of churches for propaganda is part of China's larger Sinicization campaign, a nationwide effort to leverage nonstate institutions for the promotion of Han Chinese identity and communist ideology.

The Vietnamese government controls religion, similarly, using the state-run Evangelical Church of Vietnam-South to tightly control Christian leaders and their worship practices around the country. In Vietnam, religious persecution is often wrapped up with historical political grievances, with Christians of Montagnard and Hmong descent perceived as politically disloyal, resulting in heavy persecution from authorities.

Vietnam is one of the least religious countries in the world, with data indicating that about 85% of the population does not practice a religion, instead subscribing to atheism or agnosticism. The government's discomfort with religion combined with these religious demographics allows the government to focus on the elimination of free religion, singling out religious groups for close supervision and strict controls.

NORTH KOREA'S AUTHORITARIAN RULE

While North Korea has vacillated on whether its political ideology is inspired by communism or not, its adherence to authoritarian rule has been unrelenting since its modern founding in 1948. The country has adopted its political

philosophy centered on the cult of personality developed by the ruling Kim dynasty. Central to this philosophy is the absolute supremacy of the state, and other loyalties — including religion — are rigorously persecuted.

Before the 1945 split of the Korean Peninsula, Christianity was growing rapidly throughout the north. Today, the government persecutes anyone found practicing Christianity with a severity that may be unmatched anywhere in the world.

MYANMAR'S MILITARY JUNTA

Myanmar is led by an authoritarian military junta that took power from a democratically elected government in February 2021. Though the military — known locally as the Tatmadaw — has persecuted ethnoreligious minorities for decades, the 2021 coup portended a surge in anti-minority violence that continues today. Still, minority groups have coalesced into an effective resistance, threatening the Tatmadaw's grip on power and possibly signaling a freer future for the troubled land.

SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITARIANISM IN ASIA

While Asia is plagued by secular authoritarianism, such as that found in China or Vietnam, other persecution hotspots in Asia have distinctly religious elements. In Myanmar, the Tatmadaw's violence is inspired by a violent interpretation of Buddhism. In Indonesia and Malaysia, Islamic predominance restricts Christians' rights and reduces their place in society.

Sharia law is implemented at the state or provincial level in Malaysia and Indonesia's Aceh Province, trampling on the rights of Christians forced to abide by Muslim moral codes rather than national laws regarding family and behavior. Social pressure against Christians in these countries is exacerbated by laws that provide backing to community-level persecution.

GROWTH OF CHRISTIANITY IN EAST AND SOUTHEAST

Christianity is growing in East and Southeast Asia, with some estimates making it the fastest-growing faith tradition in the region and represents about 12% of the population today. A frightening prospect to authoritarian leaders, Christianity is growing in Asia despite severe persecution.

KEY CHALLENGES

AUTHORITARIANISM

Many countries in Southeast Asia are ruled by authoritarian governments that view independent religion as a threat to their power. These government often repress religious minorities and control religious institutions.

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

In some countries, a particular religion is seen as intrinsically tied to national identity. This can lead to discrimination against religious minorities on their freedom to practice their faith.

SURVEILLANCE

Governments are increasingly using advance surveillance technologies to monitor religious activity and crack down on dissent.

BLASPHEMY LAWS

Several countries have laws that criminalize blasphemy, which can be used to silent dissent and persecute religious minorities.

WAYS TO RESPOND

PROMOTE DEMOCRACY

Support democratic institutions and human rights protections to help create an environment where religious freedom can flourish.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

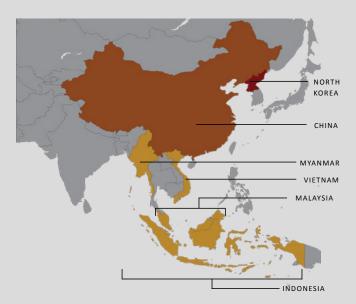
Encourage dialogue and understanding between different religious groups to help reduce tensions and promote tolerance.

LEGAL ADVOCACY

Work with lawyers and human rights groups to challenge discriminatory laws and policies. Provide resources and support to religious communities that are under threat.

RAISE AWARENESS

Increase public awareness about religious persecution to pressure governments to improve their human rights records.



AREA OF FOCUS

CHINA

The Chinese Communist Party's strict control over religious activity has led to the persecution of Christians, especially house churches and those from minority groups like Uyghurs.

INDONESIA

While officially secular, Indonesia is home to the largest population of Muslims on the planet. Its increasingly conservative Islamic landscape poses challenges for religious minorities, particularly Christians.

MALAYSIA

Malaysia's dual-track legal system, combining Islamic and civil law, often results in discriminatory practices against religious minorities who don't follow Sharia law, including Christians.

MYANMAR

The military's junta's persecution of Rohingya Muslims and other minority groups, including Christians, has led to widespread human rights abuses and displacement.

NORTH KOREA

One of the world's most repressive regimes, North Korea severely restricts religious freedom and punishes those who practice their faith outside statesanctioned channels.

VIETNAM

The Vietnamese government tightly controls religious practice, particularly for minority groups like Montagnards and Hmong Christians.

For a full list and explanations of persecution zones, visit page 8.

CHINA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Chinese Communist Party (CCP): Nearly synonymous with the Chinese government, the CCP is China's sole political party and the ideological standard-bearer behind the regime's severe repression of religion. Loyalty to the party is paramount in the Chinese way of business. Any competing loyalty, such as religion, is viewed with suspicion and swiftly stamped out or subverted to meet state goals. Under CCP direction, China has killed, tortured, or imprisoned millions — a campaign of violence that continues unabated to this day.¹

China Organ Transplant Response System (COTRS): Quietly created in 2011, COTRS is an insidious tool for religious repression in China. Its mandate is to kill and harvest organs from members of certain unfavored groups, including members of religious groups that the government would like to eliminate. While much about COTRS remains shrouded in secrecy, it is known that the system operates with brutal efficiency and attracts customers from around the world before dispatching victims, harvesting their organs, and delivering them to customers for profit.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Xi Jinping: After an early career humbly serving the CCP in various backwater provinces, Xi Jinping shot to prominence in 2007 when he was appointed to the powerful nine-member Politburo in Beijing. Five years later, he became the party's general secretary, adding the presidency a year later in December 2013. He has held both positions since.

During his tenure, Xi has cultivated a cult of personality around himself, including over Christians and religious groups, in a campaign for what he calls "Xi Jinping Thought." Part of the overall effort to assimilate all of Chinese culture into a single communist identity, this campaign demands that churches and other religious organizations promote Xi and his communist ideals as supreme over religious doctrine.



"ITS ADVANCED SURVEILLANCE CAPABILITIES AND BROAD HATRED FOR RELIGION MAKE THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT ONE OF THE WORLD'S FOREMOST PERSECUTORS."

-ICC STAFFER

STATE DEPARTMENT STATUS

COUNTRY STATUS

VL CPC

2024 COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

TRAVEL ADVISORY

EL 1 LEVEL 2 LEVEL 3

LEVEL 4

RECONSIDER TRAVEL to Mainland China due to the arbitrary enforcement of local laws, including in relation to exit bans, and the risk of wrongful detentions. (State Department, as of April 12, 2024)

PERSECUTION MEASURES

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

Unlike many persecuting countries, China does not promote or protect any one religion and, therefore, does not keep a blasphemy law, which would criminalize leaving the favored religion, on the books. However, it does regulate conversion by provisions in the broad-reaching 2017 "Religious Affairs Regulations," which restrict proselytization in schools and through charity work.⁵

While the legal code may touch on conversion only lightly, the government's daily practice of violence toward independent religious groups is, itself, a powerful deterrent to anybody considering joining one of those groups. In some cases, the government has removed children from families that are part of unregistered religious groups, presumably to indoctrinate them in communist ideology and to prevent them from adopting their parents' faith.

POLITICS

The CCP's political supremacy is the major driving force behind persecution in China. Whether the dogged pursuit of secret Christian house churches across the country or the wholesale internment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, the Chinese government is intent on rooting out every pocket of independent religious thought and replacing it with communist ideology.

Though the government does allow a protestant and a catholic church to exist, both are state-run and operate as puppets of the government and are forced to parrot CCP-dictated sermons and extol Xi Jinping Thought.⁶ Any religious institutions that operate outside of these state-run churches face severe persecution.

EDUCATION

The government allows the five state-run religious institutions to operate schools but strictly prohibits them from teaching religion as part of their curriculum. Children younger than 18 are barred from religious activities, even outside the educational context. The government mandates that atheism be taught in all schools.⁷

Schools are used to promote Xi Jinping Thought and other communist ideals, with children encouraged to join party-affiliated youth programs and become politically engaged from an early age. In the most extreme cases, some minority youths are taken from their communities and forced to stay in far-away boarding schools, where the government works systematically to strip them of their cultural, linguistic, and religious identity in favor of a communist Han identity.⁸

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

In 2017, the Chinese government began imprisoning millions of Uyghur Muslims in what many have labeled concentration camps.⁹ Euphemistically referred to as "reeducation camps" by the Chinese government, these camps have detained up to 3 million people. Leaked information from the camps shows terrible conditions and systematic abuse of the Uyghur people in the government's attempt to erase their religious identity.¹⁰

While less systematic — since Christians are spread throughout China, rather than concentrated in one region as with the Uyghurs — the arrest and imprisonment of Christians in China stems from the same motivation. Working to eradicate the house church movement, the government regularly arrests or harasses church members and leaders, sometimes holding them incommunicado for years.

SURVEILLANCE

China leads the world in the surveillance of its citizens. While the full extent of its surveillance apparatus is likely unknown, research has shown that it operates a system that aims to track every citizen's movement to gain insight into their loyalty to the CCP. From mundane details, like what a person wears, to larger observations, like who they associate with, the system works to track and understand each citizen's loyalty.

The CCP uses the data captured by this system to track and control those it deems a danger to the state. This includes anybody associated with the unregistered house church movement and anyone else wanting to practice religion outside the confines of the state-run institutions.

China Continues Efforts to Erase Christianity from Within Sept. 13, 2024

For decades, China's ruling party, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has tried to control and restrain Christianity within its borders. Its ultimate hope is to see the faith disappear from China altogether.

In 1982, the CCP released its position statement on religion, which asserts that, over the long haul, socialism will eventually take the place of religion.

"Only after the gradual development ... of a socialist civilization, with its own material and spiritual values, will ... religion gradually disappear," the statement reads. "Only when we enter this new age will all that shows a religious face in the present world finally disappear."

China, North Korea Working Together to Persecute Christians Aug. 23, 2024

According to a new report, China continues to aid North Korea in its relentless persecution of Christians.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recently published its findings on the alarming lack of religious freedom in North Korea and China's role in helping to spur it forward.

"The government of China continues to cooperate with the North Korean government to repatriate North Korean refugees in China, including those who have engaged in religious activities or come in contact with Christian missionaries, despite the risk of torture or other severe punishments upon return," the statement read.

Chinese Officials Propose Harsher Restrictions for Christians July 10, 2024

In late June, Chinese authorities discussed placing major new restrictions on Christians and religion in general. The discussions, which occurred during two meetings, highlight how the Communist government is increasingly pressuring China's vibrant underground church.

With mostly leaders of the government-controlled Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) church in attendance, meeting organizers affirmed that China's Communist Party needed to gain further control of Christianity in China.

Officials reiterated that church leaders must make President Xi Jinping's teachings on socialism and other communist teachings central to any preaching and sermons in Chinese churches. Communist officials urged TSPM church leaders to surrender more control over church affairs, including preaching.

Christian Arrested for Social Media Post Commemorating Tiananmen Square Massacre June 11, 2024

At 7 a.m. on June 4, Fu Lijun, a Chinese Christian, heard a knock on his door. When he opened it, Chengdu National Security Bureau agents arrested him and took him away.

Authorities arrested Fu, a member of Chengdu Early Rain Covenant Church, for a social media post on WeChat, a popular Chinese social media and messaging app that Communist officials

Fu's post included a song and a prayer that commemorated the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, in which China's Communist government killed pro-democracy protesters. Estimated death tolls range from a few hundred people to several thousand people. Any remembrance of the massacre is strictly forbidden in China. Communist officials have manipulated search engines to turn off results tied to the event.

Chinese Bible Distributor Sentenced to 5 Years in Prison May 1, 2024

In April 2021, Chinese authorities arrested 10 Christians for selling and distributing Bibles in Hohhot, the capital city of Inner Mongolia — an autonomous region in northern China. Just last month, a judge sentenced one of these believers to prison.

Ban Yanhong was sentenced on April 15, 2024, to five years in prison for "illegal business operations," or illegally selling and distributing Bibles to Christians in Inner Mongolia.

Ban Yanhong's husband, Ji Heying, claimed that authorities charged his wife because they considered her to be a key figure in the group. Five of the original 10 Christians have been released on bail but could still face prosecution for their role in the Bible distributions. The other four Christians are awaiting their trial.



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

ICC @ WORK

Historically, ICC has worked alongside local groups of believers and other key ministry partners, including helping imprisoned pastors and providing other support as needed. As we strengthen and re-imagine our ministry in China, we are coming alongside local groups of believers to help with discipleship, evangelism, and training. With heightened security issues due to the increasing Sinicization of every aspect of life in mainland China, ICC must remain sensitive and creative as we support persecuted Chinese believers. We have numerous other projects planned to strengthen the local church in China.

Additionally, we regularly monitor the increasing pressure Christians face in Hong Kong. Recent developments, such as the invasive National Security Law and crackdowns on free speech and activism, are of real concern. Christians globally should be aware of the increasing hardship for Christians in China and Hong Kong.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The Chinese government, led and controlled by the Chinese Communist Party, has long considered religion an existential threat to the state's authority. Consequently, it wages an intense campaign of persecution against all pockets of religion that dare to exist outside the narrow confines of state-led "religious" bodies, such as the Catholic Patriotic Association or the protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM).

This situation has continued since Mao Zedong's CCP seized power in 1949 and set up the modern-day state of China. From arresting pastors to forcibly sterilizing religious women to enacting a comprehensive surveillance state, the Chinese government has spared no effort in its decades-long campaign to eradicate the free practice of religion within its borders.

Today, government persecution of religion is led by the cult of personality that Xi Jinping has created around himself. State-led religious institutions are merely mouthpieces for his propaganda, and any corner of society that fails to conform to his vision is swiftly punished. Religion is considered a powerful alternative to the absolute loyalty that the CCP demands. With well-funded and technologically advanced tactics, China is waging a full-on assault on Christians and other religious minorities across the country.

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INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN

REPORTS



Chinese Conformity and Global Authoritarianism

A Five-Part Series



State Department

China 2023 Human Rights Report



USCIRF

Countering China's Techno-Authorianism, Transnational Repression, and Malign Political Influence



USCIRF

Sinicization of Religion: China's Coercive Religious Policy

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INDONESIA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD): Formed in 2015 by more than a dozen terror groups affiliated with the Islamic State group, JAD attacks Christians among other groups. According to a 2024 report from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, JAD targets Christians who share their faith with others. JAD has claimed responsibility for several high-profile bombings, including a 2021 attack on Makassar cathedral in South Sulawesi on Palm Sunday that injured more than a dozen. The group, while deadly, is thought to be in a state of disorganization that is hampering its effectiveness.

Government of Aceh Province: In 2001, Indonesia's central government exempted Aceh Province, the country's northernmost, from certain national laws and began allowing the government there to implement a version of Sharia criminal code.² Enforced by a dedicated religious police force, these laws significantly restrict the rights of Aceh residents. The Sharia laws force Christians in the province to abide by Islamic religious codes on a wide range of matters, from alcohol consumption to how women must act in public.

Indonesia Ulema Council (MUI): MUI is the top body of Indonesian Islamic scholars and works to preserve the ideological purity of Islam in the country. The group is active legally and politically, encouraging politicians to promote Islamic ideals in policy and lodging blasphemy charges against those it says have offended Islam.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Joko Widodo: President since 2014, Joko Widodo has overseen a significant shift toward authoritarianism and restricted rights. While some speculated that he would extend his legally mandated two-term limit, he did allow a national election in 2024. Still, his successor once served as his minister of defense and Widodo's son was chosen as vice president, indicating that there would likely be no meaningful change in policy under President-Elect Prabowo Subianto.



"FUNDAMENTALISTS THROUGHOUT INDONESIA'S GOVERNMENT AND SOCIETY HAVE CREATED A REPRESSIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR THE COUNTRY'S RELIGIOUS MINORITIES."

-ICC STAFFER

STATE DEPARTMENT STATUS

COUNTRY STATUS

TRAVEL ADVISORY

NO RECOMMENDATIONS

LEVEL 2 LEVEL 3 LEVEL 4

EXERCISE INCREASED CAUTION in Indonesia due to terrorism and natural disasters. Some areas have increased risk. (State Department, as of July 24, 2023)

PERSECUTION MEASURES

RADICAL ISLAM & EXTREMISM

The terrorism threat in Indonesia looms large for Christians and members of other disfavored minority religions. While the government — another favorite target of terrorists — actively combats terrorism, extremists still target Christians.

Aside from the terrorism threat, many Muslim communities have become sufficiently radicalized to violently resist the construction of churches. In some cases, they physically damage church buildings to halt construction.³ While Christianity is legally allowed in the country, community-level resistance to Christian presence can quickly metastasize into violence.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

Indonesia maintains a suite of blasphemy-related laws and regulations that work in concert to criminalize Christianity and other minority religious beliefs.4 These legal structures allow authorities and private Islamic groups to prosecute those who challenge their interpretation of Islam, including online. Authorities are aggressive in their actions against those perceived to blaspheme Islam, 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.⁵

In December 2022, the Indonesian Parliament passed a sweeping update to the country's criminal code that human rights groups criticized for several provisions that severely limited human rights. Termed "disastrous" by Human Rights Watch, the law broadens the definition of blasphemy and adds an apostasy law to the books.

POLITICS

The Indonesian political scene has grown increasingly authoritarian in recent years, with the government showing itself intolerant of dissenting political and religious viewpoints. While some of its actions regarding religion are based on attempts to quell growing radicalization, its overreach into regulating the details of religious life across the country is concerning and acts to broadly limit religious freedom.

The government only recognizes certain set religions, leading to difficulties for those who do not wish to participate in the

While longtime president Joko Widodo termed out in 2024, the next administration is widely expected to continue his policies. The revamped criminal code, which was passed in 2022 and represents extreme restriction of rights, is set to be implemented in 2026. However, there are pockets of resistance to its implementation in society.

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 the six recognized religions do not have the option to receive education in their faith or to opt out of these mandatory

The government remains highly interested in religion, viewing it with suspicion but using it as a tool for control. The application for a national identification card asks citizens to choose a religious affiliation, posing issues for some who wish to choose a religion other than the officially recognized ones. ID cards are required for access to many public services, including education.

REFUGEES & IDP CAMPS

Indonesia assumed the rotating leadership of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 2023. While it did not ignore the issue of religious freedom entirely during its tenure, it failed to address the ongoing crisis in Myanmar, including the resulting refugee crisis. Indonesia has also made a pattern of rejecting refugees from Myanmar, who are mostly persecuted Rohingya Muslims, in contravention of established international law

REGULATIONS

The 2006 Joint Decree on Houses of Worship requires that religious groups obtain support from other religions in their community to receive approval to construct a house of worship. In addition to creating a logistical barrier for local congregations, this requirement exposes Christians to unwanted scrutiny in their communities. In many cases, local extremists are vocal in their opposition and manage to cancel or delay construction for extended periods.

Church Faithfully Worships Outside as Wait for Building Permit Enters 11th Year

Sept. 18, 2024

Like so many other Sunday mornings, the 600 members of Indonesian Christ Congregation Church-Millenium Peace (GKJI-MD) gathered on an empty plot of land near Kartasura Terminal in Kartasura District, Sukoharjo Regency, this past Sunday. They set up a large tent to shield themselves from the scorching sun and laid mats on the ground to prepare for worship.

While some churches worship outdoors on special occasions, GKJI-MD has done so for 11 years. And it hasn't been due to a matter of preference. That's how long it's been waiting for a building permit.

Pastor Father Ari Suksmono said the congregation purchased land in Wirogunan Village, Kartasura District, Sukoharjo Regency, 11 years ago. Still, the church could not build on it because there was no permit or recommendation from the Interfaith Harmony Forum (FKUB). He said the church applied for the permit 10 years ago.

Christian Apologist Released from Indonesian Prison Sept. 12, 2024

Christian apologist Gratia Pello is out on parole after nearly a year in an Indonesian prison.

Pello was arrested and charged with blasphemy on Dec. 6, 2022, for allegedly insulting the Islamic prophet Muhammad in a video he posted that refuted insults against Jesus. Following his arrest, Pello's condition remained unknown for several months.

An International Christian Concern (ICC) staffer who recently spoke with Pello confirmed his release, stating that Pello was granted parole on Feb. 20. He must report to the prosecutor's office monthly until his parole ends in December.

Muslim Residents Prohibit Indonesian Church from Worshipping July 24, 2024

Another church in Indonesia has faced pressure to stop its worship services.

Residents living near the Tesalonika Church in Kampung Melayu Timur, Teluk Naga District, Tangerang, recently rioted and demanded that the church cease its worship activities. Footage of the rioters ridiculing the church for having to gather inside a home went viral on social media this week.

One resident stated that the mob stopped the church's worship because the service occurred in a majority-Muslim community. A representative of Tesalonika Church shared that the church had been gathering inside a home because their lease for their previous place of worship at the Puri Naga Indah complex had expired.

Terror Suspect Arrested in Batu had Planned to Bomb Places of Worship

Aug. 2, 2024

Indonesia's National Police counter-terrorism squad arrested on July 31 a 19-year-old suspected terrorist who had planned to attack places of worship.

"The plan was to detonate bombs at two places of worship in Malang," said Karo Penmas, Public Relations Division of the National Police, Brigadier General Trunoyudo Wisnu Andiko.

During the student's arrest in Batu, Malang Regency, East Java, the terror squad known as Densus 88 confiscated several pieces of evidence, including chemicals believed to be used for making

"Based on the results of the investigation, it is known that the suspect planned to carry out a suicide bombing using TATP (triacetone triperoxide) explosives," Penmas explained.

Muslims Alarmed at Rapid Growth of Christianity in Indonesia May 1, 2024

An Islamic social media campaign known as #SaveMaryam is raising awareness of the spread of Christianity throughout Indonesia — and it's using controversial statistics and statements

The campaign's manager stated that 2 million Muslims convert to Christianity every year in the country. He added that Indonesia would cease to be a predominantly Muslim nation by 2035.

Critics and commentators have accused the campaign's team of being alarmist, creating unnecessary religious tension, and giving inaccurate information to raise more funds for their activities.



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

ICC @ WORK

ICC's work in the world's largest Muslim nation continues to expand in key areas. These include:

- Bibles ICC provides Bibles to communities throughout Indonesia, including larger print Bibles for elderly believers and audio Bibles in local languages.
- Evangelism Support ICC partners with local ministries to help with evangelism and discipleship needs in exceedingly difficult areas.
- Aid to Christians God continues to provide many opportunities to support Christians in Indonesia who face hardships and attacks. We provide safe housing for Christians who receive threats from family members and provide education opportunities to disadvantaged believers.

REPORTS



State Department Indonesia 2023 Human Rights Report

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Known for containing the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia is also home to more than 30 million members of other faiths. According to the U.S. Department of State, Papua, West Papua, East Nusa Tenggara, and North Sulawesi provinces are majority Christian, while Bali is majority Hindu.

While these populations are not without protections — the Indonesian constitution ostensibly guarantees freedom of religion — there are also significant challenges for members of non-Muslim faith communities, including some issues that are getting worse. Sadly, Indonesia's religiously pluralistic history is fading in the face of new laws and practices hindering access to true religious freedom.

From blasphemy laws that criminalize minority religious thought to building codes that sometimes prevent new churches, the legal landscape in Indonesia is designed to favor the majority Sunni Muslim population over other religious groups.

Only six religions — Sunni Islam, Catholicism, Protestant Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism — are allowed to operate, and even then, under an ever-tightening set of legal restrictions. In some parts of the country, extremist interpretations of Islam hold de facto sway over affairs, leading to attacks on Christians and others, inhibiting the ability of minorities to gather for worship, and creating an environment of religious repression that is difficult to quantify.

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USCIRF

Country Update: Indonesia January 2024

MALAYSIA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Sharia Judicial System: Malaysia operates under a confusing array of legal systems that have not been fully resolved. States are responsible for administering Sharia law under the guidance of sultans who oversee the Sharia courts and appoint judges, but a separate federal legal system also exists. The federal system is constitutionally relegated to second place behind Sharia code, though the federal court did rule in 2018 that it could supersede Sharia law in cases to do with the conversion of minors.

Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS): Recent years have seen a rise in ethnoreligious nationalism and corresponding gains for the PAS, which strongly appeals to an extremist nationalist base. The PAS maintains a significant presence in Parliament, though it has thus far shown limited potential for translating these gains into national legislative momentum. Sharia in states run by PAS is particularly intrusive for citizens. PAS supporters incite religious hatred and violence online and at marches, stirring up discontent and directing hate speech at religious and ethnic minorities.1

Selangor State Islamic Department (MAIS): Located on the West Coast, Selangor borders the federal territories and boasts the largest state GDP in the country. In 2023, MAIS barred Muslims from visiting non-Muslim places of worship or engaging in any of their activities. Violators of this law face fines or up to a year in prison. These types of regulations, targeting and restricting Muslims from following their conscience freely, are unfortunately all too common in states across the country.



"ETHNIC RESTRICTIONS AND A LEGAL SYSTEM BASED ON SHARIA CREATE VASTLY INEQUAL **EXPERIENCES OF RELIGIOUS** FREEDOM IN MALAYSIA."

-ICC STAFFER

STATE DEPARTMENT STATUS

COUNTRY STATUS

NO RECOMMENDATIONS

TRAVEL ADVISORY





PERSECUTION MEASURES

RADICAL ISLAM & EXTREMISM

While Malaysia has waged an effective campaign against terrorism within its borders, undercurrents of radical Islamic extremism continue to flow in society and government. On social media, hate speech directed at religious minorities is common, and supporters of the PAS political party, among others, have marched en masse in support of extremist policies.

Within the federal and state levels of government, elements of radical Islam are visible in law and enforcement, including federal bans on blasphemy and state-level criminalization of apostasy, or leaving Islam for another religion.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

Several provisions in the national penal code criminalize blasphemy, while a separate law, the Communications and Multimedia Act of 1998, is used by officials to prohibit blasphemous statements online. Blasphemy laws are potent tools for tamping down religious diversity in an area, effectively criminalizing the expression of minority religious opinions by declaring them insults to Islam.

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 United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.² These state laws are part of a larger framework of laws that specifically target Muslims and Muslim-background Christian believers.

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."3 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 faiths.

REGULATIONS

Missionaries and local Christians report significant issues in outreach to ethnic Malays due to strict government regulations. Article 160 of the Malaysian Constitution declares ethnic Malays Muslim by default and provides no recourse for Malays wishing to convert to Christianity or another religion.⁴ As a result of regulations on the conversion of Malays, many local Christians refuse to evangelize Malays or allow converts to Christianity to join their church.

Malaysian Borneo enjoys a slightly greater degree of religious freedom because its inhabitants have never been Muslim, instead following traditional tribal traditions before the arrival of Christian missionaries. The Malaysian government even allows them to access a translation of the Bible that is banned in mainland Malaysia because it uses the word "Allah" to reference the Christian God — terminology that is considered offensive on the mainland. As a result, Malays do not have access to a translation of the Bible.

The Shariah Index's Continued Influence on Malaysian Society

Sept. 20, 2024

The Department of Islamic Development Malaysia's (JAKIM) recent proposal for mandatory halal certification for establishments that do not serve pork or alcohol has sparked considerable debate — and it points to a larger societal issue.

A significant underlying factor in this policy development is the Shariah Index, which was introduced in 2015. This index evaluates Malaysia's adherence to Islamic principles across various sectors, including the economy, education, and social policies. The move toward mandatory halal certification aligns with the objectives of the Shariah Index, which seeks to ensure that public policies and practices reflect Islamic values.

Implementing mandatory halal certification could pose challenges for non-Muslim businesses, particularly those located near places of worship like churches and temples. The financial and regulatory burdens involved in obtaining halal certification may affect the viability of these establishments.

While this policy seeks to promote Islamic principles and provide assurance to Muslim consumers, it concurrently raises significant concerns regarding the effect on non-Muslim enterprises and the broader issue of religious freedom.

Proposal for Muslims to Preach in Non-Muslim Houses of Worship Challenged

Aug. 19, 2024

A leading interfaith group in Malaysia has criticized a top Islamic official's suggestion that Muslims be allowed to preach in churches and other non-Islamic places of worship.

The Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Taoism (MCCBCHST) expressed concerns that such a move could increase tensions and undermine the sanctity of other houses of worship.

The controversy erupted after Datuk Mohamad Sabri Haron, the Mufti of Terengganu, stated that Muslims have the right to enter places of worship of other faiths to spread Islam. The Mufti's remarks sparked outrage among non-Muslim communities, who view the proposal as a direct challenge to religious freedom and interfaith harmony in the predominantly Muslim nation.



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

Petition Denouncing the Disappearance of Missing Pastor Gains Nearly 30,000 Signatures May 31, 2024

The American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) recently reposted a petition on the social media site X demanding answers from the Malaysian government on Pastor Raymond Koh's whereabouts. After nearly two months, the petition has acquired 29,115 signatures.

"Pastor Raymond Koh has been missing for [seven] years in Malaysia [and] the Malaysian government refuses to provide answers," the post stated. "Now the ACLJ is advocating for his freedom at the U.N."

The organization, known for its religious liberty work, filed an annual submission with the United Nations in 2023 that addressed religious liberty violations by the Malaysian government, including Koh's disappearance.

Madani Government Pushes for Centralized Islam in Malaysia Aug. 23, 2024

Anwar Ibrahim's Madani government is steadily working to centralize Islam in Malaysia. Efforts to impose a "Vatican-style" authority could have far-reaching implications for religious freedom, especially for Christians and followers of other minority religions.

The government, which already severely punishes Muslims who convert to Christianity, recently introduced bills that restrict the practice of Islam in Malaysia to specific Islamic schools of thought, namely Al-Asyairah, Al-Maturidiah, and Syafie Madhab. By excluding other Islamic sects, the government could potentially punish anyone who deviates from these forms of Islam.

Malaysian Woman Loses Battle to be Declared a Non-Muslim May 16, 2024

In a decision that could have ramifications for Muslims who have converted to Christianity, the Penang High Court dismissed a woman's bid to legally be declared a non-Muslim on her national ID card. Justice Quay Chew Soon dismissed the 27-year-old woman's case, saying the issue should be heard in the country's Shariah courts, not civil court. Although the woman's adoptive mother raised her as a Hindu, her national ID card states she is Muslim because her deceased birth mother was a Muslim. The woman has stated that she has never practiced Islam.

Justice Soon said that under Section 2(1) of the Administration of the Religion of Islam (State of Penang) Enactment 2004, a state law, the woman is considered Muslim if either of her parents are of that faith. Those who leave Islam to follow Christ in Malaysia and many other countries are still labeled Muslim on their national ID cards, and the push to change their religion on their official documents is often difficult, if not impossible.







ICC @ WORK

Christians in Malaysia often face challenges to their religious freedoms, and we've seen growing pressure on the Christian community in recent years. Many Muslims who convert to Christianity face legal, social, and cultural pressures, including accusations of apostasy. Furthermore, Christians from Indigenous Malaysian communities often experience discrimination in education, employment, and social interactions. Some groups, like the Council of Churches of Malaysia and the Christian Federation of Malaysia, advocate for protecting Christians' rights and religious freedoms. ICC supports local believers wherever possible in safe and creative ways, especially new Christians. Although we cannot talk openly about our projects in Malaysia, we thank God for generous donors and our courageous local missionaries for developing initiatives to support persecuted Christians.

REPORT



State Department Malaysia 2023 Human Rights Report

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Shortly after gaining independence from the United Kingdom, Malaysia was founded as a secular state in 1963. Malaysian law has long codified religious discrimination and the promotion of Sunni Islam over other creeds. Even its constitution, despite claiming to create a secular state, declares that "Islam is the religion of the Federation" and mandates that all ethnic Malays be considered Muslim by default, regardless of their convictions or their family's religious heritage.

Though less than two-thirds of the population of Malaysia identifies as Muslim, the government has created a system designed to restrict Christians and religious minorities 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.

While updating one's religious designation on MyKad may be a matter of personal conviction for converts from Islam, it is also an important legal matter since the country runs parallel legal systems, with Muslim citizens under the jurisdiction of Sharia courts. These courts have become increasingly empowered throughout the years, with an amendment to the constitution clarifying that secular civil courts may not decide on matters that fall under the authority of Sharia courts.

Non-Muslims do not have standing in Sharia courts but may be brought before Sharia courts in some cases, including family matters involving divorce, conversion, and underage marriage. This leads to situations in which Christians and other religious minorities are treated unequally under the law and are left with little legal recourse in a system designed to promote the majority religion.

Onerous as it is to convert from Islam, there are no similar restrictions for non-Muslims desiring to convert to Islam. The law even allows for so-called unilateral conversions, where one parent may convert to Islam and declare his or her children Muslim as well. This declaration places questions of custody and other family matters under the jurisdiction of Sharia courts, where the non-Muslim spouse has no legal standing. This legal structure has led to cases where children have been taken from non-Muslim parents and then left with no legal recourse.

CITATIONS

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MYANMAR

Note on names: "Burma" and "Myanmar" are two names for the same country. The terms can be 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.

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Tatmadaw: The Tatmadaw, as the Burmese military is called locally, has waged a long war against Myanmar's people. Ongoing since the country gained independence in 1948, the Tatmadaw's war is the world's longest ongoing civil war and has caused hundreds of thousands of fatalities. Most of the victims are among the civilian population, which the Tatmadaw is known to attack indiscriminately with airstrikes and brutal ground operations.

State Administration Council (SAC): Rising in 2021 as the ruling body of the Tatmadaw, the SAC works to complement the military's brutal repression of the people and, like the military, works relentlessly to eliminate minority populations and prodemocracy activists. The SAC manages the junta's international relations and has funneled more than \$1 billion of arms into the military's hands, mostly from its partners in Russia and China. The junta has destroyed "nearly 200 religious buildings across Burma, including 85 churches in Chin State," according to a report from Radio Free Asia.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Min Aung Hlaing: Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has ruled Myanmar since the 2021 coup, which he led. Despite occasional claims of respect for democracy, he has amassed power for himself, holding the positions of chairman of the SAC, prime minister, and president — the last title he bestowed upon himself in 2024. He has led the military's campaigns against ethnoreligious minorities, including the Rohingya genocide beginning in 2016, and continues to direct the military's persecution of these groups.



"EMBOLDENED BY ITS 2021 OVERTHROW OF THE CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT, THE MILITARY JUNTA IN MYANMAR TODAY HAS NOT EASED ITS DECADES-LONG WAR ON RELIGIOUS MINORITIES."

-ICC STAFFER

STATE DEPARTMENT STATUS

COUNTRY STATUS

TRAVEL ADVISORY

SWL

CPC

LEVEL 1

EVEL 3 LEVEL 4

2023 COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

DO NOT TRAVEL to Burma due to civil unrest, armed conflict, and arbitrary enforcement of local laws. (State Department, as of June 6, 2024)

PERSECUTION MEASURES

BUDDHIST EXTREMISM

Representing an extremist interpretation of Buddhism, the Tatmadaw has long persecuted ethnic and religious minorities. It purports to represent the interests of the country's mostly Buddhist Burman majority, pursuing nationalism and leaving no room in society for other identities. Research suggests, though, that many in the Buddhist Burman populace have stopped supporting the Tatmadaw, which has brutally cracked down on civilian rights.

While it recognizes a handful of faiths, the constitution establishes Buddhism as the de facto state religion and creates a groundwork on which extremism has flourished. While the Tatmadaw does not spare Buddhists whom it perceives as hindering its absolute grip on power, it supports and encourages extremist priests who call for violence against Christians and spread disinformation online to promote ethnoreligious division.

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

While the junta's adherence to Burma's laws is inconsistent and based more on convenience than justice, the country's legal code does tightly regulate interfaith marriage, proselytization, and the religion one declares on identification documents. Citizens must update their identification documents if they change their religion and go through a cumbersome process to do so, including "questioning by the Registration Board to ascertain whether the person truly believes in the said religion."

POLITICS

Myanmar's government is run by the same military that has, for decades, waged war against its people. The government does not allow political dissent or democratic involvement from the people. In fact, it seized power just hours before a democratically elected session of Parliament was set to choose new executive officials. In its coup, the Tatmadaw detained hundreds of parliamentarians to stifle political resistance.⁴

Some of these leaders, along with an array of officials from parts of the former government, have coalesced to form the National Unity Government (NUG), a government in exile that aims to represent the democratic will of the people. While the NUG has no role in the military-led government, it has amassed impressive support among the people and created a broad-based coalition that may offer an effective alternative to the Tatmadaw should the latter eventually lose its grip on power.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

Research by the nongovernmental group Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) indicates that the Tatmadaw-led government has arrested more than 27,000 people since taking power in 2021. Of that number, more than 20,000 are still detained.⁵ While the regime has released some prisoners, many of those who remain are being arbitrarily detained for no apparent reason.⁶

The Tatmadaw's core concern is to maintain its 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

The ongoing crisis in Myanmar has displaced millions of people. Research by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center accessed in 2024 found 2.9 million displaced people in the country — 2.6 million of whom were displaced by conflict. Natural disasters led to the displacement of the other 300,000 people. Many more are now refugees in neighboring countries, seeking shelter from the constant barrage of attacks against their communities back home in Myanmar.

Military Beats, Detains Christians Following Raid May 24, 2024

In Kachin state, Northern Myanmar, military forces detained dozens of Christian leaders, pastors, and youth on Thursday on suspicion of aiding rebel forces in the country's ongoing civil war.

Radio Free Asia Burmese reported that roughly 100 soldiers initially detained more than 200 villagers in a school, where they were threatened and interrogated. Some were beaten, including local Christian leaders. The soldiers released the villagers after nearly nine hours of questioning about their ties to the Kachin Independent Army (KIA) and other anti-Junta militias.

In recent months, two pastors were murdered, and numerous Christians have been harassed and beaten in Kachin state, which has a large Christian population. According to the 2020 Burmese Population and Housing Census Report, about 34% of Kachin state's 1.6 million residents are Christians. Some advocacy groups estimate that that number is closer to two-thirds of the state's population.

The KIA has been hugely successful in Northern Myanmar recently, capturing and defeating several military junta camps. Subsequently, the junta forces are actively raiding Kachin villages, seeking information on KIA forces.

Junta Forces Continue to Destroy Churches in Myanmar May 23, 2024

According to the Burma Human Rights Network's (BHRN) April 2024 update report, the Tatmadaw military junta forces are continuing to destroy churches and persecute Christians as they fight pro-democracy forces throughout Burma, now known as Myanmar.

The BHRN, a London-based group focused on human rights, minority rights, and religious freedom in Myanmar, publishes monthly reports and statistics regarding the ongoing war in the country. In the religious freedoms section of the April 2024 report, they noted serious persecution incidents for Christians, Buddhists, and Muslims. Regarding Christians, the report detailed the following: Junta troops used a drone to destroy a church in a village in Kalay Township in Sagaing Region on April 8. The junta ransacked 400 homes and five churches in a raid on a village in Kalay Township in Sagaing Region on April 12. On April 23, local authorities banned gatherings of more than five people in Ha-Kha Township in Chin state. Sources told the BHRN that this move is to prevent churches from gathering.



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

Baptist Pastor Re-Arrested the Night He's Released from Prison May 31, 2024

To mark the Buddhist New Year festival of Thingyan, officials in Myanmar released 3,300 people from prison. Authorities rearrested one of them, a Baptist pastor, later that night.

The pastor, The Rev. Hkalam Samson, is a well-known and respected church leader and former chair of the Kachin Baptist Convention. He is also an outspoken advocate and defender of the rights of religious and ethnic minorities in Myanmar. The U.S. Department of State has called for his release.

Samson was released in the afternoon on April 17. At 10 p.m. that night, security officials detained him at his home. The reverend, who was originally detained on false charges of unlawful association, inciting opposition to the regime, and terrorism, was sentenced in April 2023 to six years in prison. Originally detained in December 2022, Samson had served 16 months of his sentence at the time of his release.

Priest Shot During Sermon in Northern Myanmar April 17, 2024

Two masked gunmen shot Catholic priest Paul Hkwi Shane Aung three times as he preached a sermon at St. Patrick Catholic Church in Myanmar's Kachin state. The attack happened on the morning of Friday, April 12, during a mass service.

Aung was shot in the jaw, hand, and thigh but survived the attempted murder. He remains in serious condition at a local hospital. The gunmen fled the scene and have not been identified. Clergy and Christian communities have been frequently attacked since the 2021 Tatmadaw military coup.

73 Churches Attacked in War-Torn **Myanmar Since 2021** Dec. 11, 2023

Since February 2021, the Tatmadaw military attacked and destroyed 74 churches and arrested 42 Christians, according to the Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN).

The BHRN continues to report increased violence, killings of civilians, and extra judicial killings.

This latest report is written in light of the huge offensive by pro-democracy and indigenous ethnic forces (loosely called the Brotherhood Alliance) right across Myanmar against the Tatmadaw military dictatorship.

ICC @ WORK

Myanmar's ongoing civil war has made it difficult to support local Christians, especially during the last year. However, ICC has managed to provide spiritual and humanitarian support to more than 130 Christian families in an IDP camp in Northern Myanmar.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Though Myanmar's population is about 87% Buddhist, many religious minority communities exist throughout the country, including in Kayeh state, where about 46% of the population identifies as Christian. On Myanmar's Western border with India, Chin state is about 85% Christian, while Rakhine state is home to a significant population of Rohingya people, most of whom are Muslim.

The Tatmadaw represents an extremist interpretation of Buddhism and has long persecuted these ethnic and religious minorities with severe campaigns of violence and intimidation.

Still, experts believe that the Tatmadaw is atrophying rapidly, with as few as 150,000 personnel remaining after losing about 21,000 through casualties or desertions since the 2021 coup. This number is significantly smaller than previous estimates of 300,000 to 400,000 and calls into question the junta's ability to sustain its nationwide military campaign. Research from the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar suggests that anti-junta militia gains have reduced the area under solid Tatmadaw control to 17% or less.

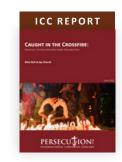
In 2024, the U.N. released figures showing a threefold increase in civilian casualties by landmines in 2023 over the previous year, verifying 1,052 incidents in 2023 compared to 390 in 2022.7 More than 20% of victims were children, according to reports.

"Children are particularly vulnerable to landmines as they are less likely to recognize them and may be unaware of their dangers," the U.N. said in its report, going on to explain that "the widespread deployment of weapons throughout the country means that children can encounter landmines practically anywhere, including near their homes, schools, playgrounds, and farming areas."8

The junta is known to abduct children, forcing them to walk ahead of their troops through minefields. In many cases, their victims are members of ethnic and religious minority communities fighting against the atrocities of a military that has waged a decades-long war of ethnic and religious cleansing.

The United States has led several rounds of sanctions against the Tatmadaw regime, though with relatively little effect. While Tatmadaw officials admit that the sanctions can create difficulties, they remain unconcerned about current or impending sanctions. It has worked around Western sanctions for many years and primarily trades with partners like China and Russia, which do not abide by U.S. sanctions.

REPORTS



Caught in the Crossfire Mvanmar's Christian Minorities Under Tatmadaw Rule



State Department

Burma 2023 Human Rights Report



USCIRF

Country Update: Burma October 2024

CITATIONS

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NORTH KOREA

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Ministry of State Security, Prisons Bureau: Directly reporting to Kim Jong Un, the country's supreme leader, the Ministry of State Security administers the country's network of political prisons in which an estimated 120,000 people are detained for real or imagined opposition to the regime. A large but unknown number of religious prisoners, mostly Christians whom the regime considers to be enemies of the state, are among those detained.

In these prisons, torture, rape, slave labor, starvation, and infanticide are common, according to survivors who have escaped to other countries and testified about their experiences. Prison guards are empowered to engage in the most heinous of crimes against humanity, protected from consequence by a regime that uses this network of political prisons to suppress any form of dissent.

Judiciary of North Korea: North Korea's judicial system, with the Central Court at its head, imposes the country's draconian laws on any who attempt to follow Christianity — a faith which, according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, is "especially vulnerable" to persecution.² Being caught praying, owning a Bible, listening to sermons, or gathering with other believers are all crimes under the law as enforced by the judiciary.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Kim Jong Un: The latest in a dynastic line of repressive North Korean dictators, Kim Jong Un is bent on furthering a system designed to suppress religion, eliminate dissent, and elevate Juche — the country's official ideology. 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. Since taking the role of supreme leader in 2011, Kim Jong Un has continued the country's extreme persecution of Christians.

Under Kim, Christianity is brutally restricted. Aside from the narrow confines of the state-sponsored church, which is kept for show, religion is viewed as a direct threat to the state. 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 surrounding it. This political philosophy, which has taken on the unwieldy name Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, reigns supreme in the country and leaves no room for free religious practice.



"PERHAPS THE MOST DANGEROUS COUNTRY ON EARTH TO BE A CHRISTIAN, NORTH KOREA HAS PERFECTED A NATIONAL SYSTEM TO ELIMINATE THE CHRISTIAN FAITH, WHICH IT SEES AS AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT TO ITS GRIP ON POWER."

-ICC STAFFER

STATE DEPARTMENT STATUS

COUNTRY STATUS

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1 LEVEL 2 LEVEL 3

LEVEL 4

2023 COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

DO NOT TRAVEL to North Korea due to the continuing serious risk of arrest and long-term detention of U.S. nationals. Exercise increased caution to North Korea due to the critical threat of wrongful detention. (State Department, as of July 24, 2022)

PERSECUTION MEASURES

CPC

POLITICS

Perhaps more than in any other country, a desire for complete political power is what drives persecution in North Korea. Loyalty to anything other than the Kim family and the North Korean state is viewed as treason, and government officials are authorized to use any means necessary to punish citizens showing any signs of faith. While this is true for all faiths, the regime views Christianity as a particularly dangerous threat to its grip on power since Christianity had a strong foothold in the country before the Kim family came to power in 1948.

For propaganda purposes, the government maintains a state-sanctioned church in the capital, Pyongyang, but does not allow the site to be used for any real Christian worship or belief. According to the human rights watchdog group Freedom House, "intense state indoctrination and repression preclude free and open exercise of religion" in North Korea.³

EDUCATION

Education, along with every other aspect of North Korean life, is controlled by the government and used to indoctrinate citizens. According to Freedom House, the state approves all curricula, and the system is such that there is "no academic freedom." At every turn, North Korean citizens are subjected to intense propaganda and steeped in hatred and fear of "Western" influences, including Christianity. Those deemed less loyal to the regime are kept from educational opportunities.⁵

Those caught pursuing ideologies other than Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism are swiftly arrested and often put in reeducation camps where they are intentionally broken down mentally and physically and fed a steady diet of state-sponsored indoctrination.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

While reliable statistics about the internal affairs of North Korea are hard to find, it is estimated that about 120,000 people are currently detained in the country's extensive prison system. Of this number, as many as 70,000 are detained because of their Christian faith — a shocking statistic and one that underscores the enduring importance of Christianity in North Korea despite decades of oppressive rule.⁶

The government holds prisoners in several types of facilities, including facilities designed for political prisoners, detention facilities for those caught trying to escape the country, forced labor camps around the country, and Russia, which pays North Korea for forced prisoner labor. In each of these facilities, reports indicate that torture, rape, forced abortions, and the killing of children are chillingly common, with no regard for human dignity or basic human rights.

SURVEILLANCE

As is common in communist and socialist states, North Korea surveils its citizens extensively to manipulate and control its people. Officials demand that citizens help them in this effort, with severe punishments given to any who do not proactively report their friends, family, and neighbors to the police.⁷

Speaking to the U.N. Security Council, Volker Türk, United Nations high commissioner for human rights, testified to increased fear of surveillance in recent years. "Homes are subjected to random searches," according to a U.N. summary of his briefing, "and people are encouraged to report on each other. Punishments for minor infractions can be severe." Under such conditions, Christians are forced to practice their faith with the utmost secrecy. They cannot freely discuss their faith, gather with fellow believers, or listen to Christian radio broadcasts from overseas.

Bible Possession Leads to North Korean Toddler, Parents Imprisoned for Life

May 30, 2023

North Korea has reportedly sentenced a two-year-old to life in prison after his parents were arrested for possessing a Bible, according to the U.S. Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report 2022. The child's parents were taken into custody after being found with a Bible, which is considered contraband in North Korea.

North Korea's government, known for its tight information control and religious suppression faces widespread criticism for its human rights record. This latest incident adds to concerns about the regime's opposition. As many as 70,000 Christians and other religious minorities are imprisoned in camps.

"The right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion [in North Korea] also continues to be denied, with no alternative belief systems tolerated by the authorities," António Guterres, the United Nation's secretary-general said in the report outlining liberty religious atrocities that have occurred in North Korea in the past years.

The Unstoppable Gospel in North Korea

Sept. 19, 2024

Illyong has witnessed firsthand the brutal persecution of Christians in North Korea. His family has been torn apart, with many members taken into political prison camps after their faith was discovered. Despite these harrowing experiences, Illyong remains hopeful for his homeland.

"The gospel is unstoppable," he declared, a belief that fuels his advocacy for North Korean Christians. "I feel an obligation to tell my story ... I hope that my testimony will contribute to informing the world of the oppression that North Korean people are suffering."

Illyong shares that despite severe persecution, the Bible has become known in North Korean markets as a "book of blessings." This remarkable spread of faith highlights the resilience of North Korean Christians, who, like the 7,000 righteous who did not bow to Baal, stand firm against the regime's oppression.



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

North Korea's Fiery Furnace April 18, 2024

North Korea is one of the world's most oppressive regimes, systematically targeting Christians as part of its control over dissent and free expression. North Korea's hatred of Christianity, seen as a competing ideology, has led to the execution of up to 70% of captured Christians, while others are sent to brutal labor camps or gulags, where they face starvation, torture, and forced labor. Christianity is driven underground, with believers hiding their faith even from family. The state employs a web of control comprised of the songbun caste system, a pervasive police state, and the gulag network to maintain loyalty and suppress any perceived disobedience.

North Korea Again Tops List of Worst Christian Persecutors Jan. 20, 2024

North Korea has again topped Open Door's World Watchlist of the 50 countries with the worst record and levels of Christian persecution. International Christian Concern (ICC) has regularly highlighted the atrocities and huge suffering that North Korean Christians face under Kim Jong Un's tyrannical regime. ICC included the hermit kingdom in its comprehensive 2023 annual persecution report.

China, North Korea Working Together to Persecute Christians Aug. 23, 2024

According to a new report, China continues to aid North Korea in its relentless persecution of Christians.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recently published its findings on the alarming lack of religious freedom in North Korea and China's role in helping to spur it forward.

"The government of China continues to cooperate with the North Korean government to repatriate North Korean refugees in China, including those who have engaged in religious activities or come in contact with Christian missionaries, despite the risk of torture or other severe punishments upon return," the statement read.

As North Korea shares a large border with China, many North Koreans flee persecution and travel to China in a desperate attempt to start new lives. It's a calculated risk that many make, hoping to find human kindness from Christian missionaries or others who will help them before authorities catch them. However, for many of these individuals, life remains bleak. Stories of human trafficking and maltreatment of North Korean refugees at the hands of Chinese authorities and organized crime rings are common.

ICC @ WORK

This year, ICC implemented some inventive projects to support North Korean Christians. However, we cannot talk about these projects openly. One project that has continued is our ongoing partnership and support of Free North Korea Radio, which broadcasts gospel messages into North Korea from South Korea and delivers gospel resources and humanitarian aid to North Korean Christians.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Juche, a central tenant of the North Korean government, is a political philosophy based on self-reliance and closure to the outside world. Though resoundingly successful in closing itself to the international community — which has, for its part, also worked to silo North Korea — its aspirations to self-reliance have been far less successful.

Not only does North Korea rely on the exchange of resources, including forced labor, with its neighbors China and Russia, but by nearly every metric, the country is failing. Though the government uses its robust internal propaganda machine to project an image of prosperity, the population experiences a widespread lack of access to adequate food, with food insecurity only deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this fraught context, every person and resource in the country is treated as property of the state. The Kim dynasty, in power since the country's founding in 1948, demands absolute loyalty. No person is safe from the Kim family's grasp, from peasants whose every move is dictated by state overlords to powerful generals, who are publicly executed in dramatic fashion, blown up as targets for missiles, or reportedly eaten by piranhas in a large tank kept in Kim Jong Un's home.

Independent thought is strictly prohibited, with Christianity a particular target of state censors. Anyone caught with a Bible, listening to Christian broadcasts from South Korea on the radio, and even in private prayer are subject to severe punishment. Those caught, and often their families and friends as well, are swept away and detained indefinitely in North Korea's many prisons where they endure the most extreme human deprayity imaginable.

Despite the persecution, former North Korean prisoners report that some Christians are courageous enough to share the gospel with their fellow inmates, hosting silent prayer gatherings and sharing contraband scripture at the risk of their lives. It is essential that the international community, including South Korea, band together to push for the advancement of human rights in North Korea. North Korea's many innocent civilians deserve no less.

REPORTS



State Department

2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: North Korea

CITATIONS

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VIETNAM

OVERVIEW

WHAT GROUPS/ENTITIES ARE CAUSING THE MOST HARM?

Government Committee for Religious Affairs (GCRA): Created in the early 2000s as the successor to the earlier Central Committee on Religion, Vietnam's GCRA is used by the government as a tool for controlling and co-opting religion across the country. For decades, the group has worked to control religious figures, regulate worship, and ensure that religious groups' resources are used for the state.

Under the 2018 Law on Belief and Religion, religious groups in Vietnam must register with the GCRA to operate legally and, additionally, are required to gain approval for all religious activities for the following year.² This blanket requirement gives the GCRA extremely wide latitude to prosecute unregistered religious groups and micromanage registered groups' internal affairs.

Provincial Officials: Reports indicate that religious freedom conditions in Vietnam are worse in rural areas, where local officials are empowered to make decisions that often restrict or otherwise harm Christians. Particularly in the Central Highlands and Northern Highlands, officials are known for "physically abusing, intimidating, and harassing individuals from religious minority groups," according to the U.S. Department of State.³

Members of ethnic minorities, including Christians of Montagnard and Hmong descent, have long been targeted by the government for perceived political disloyalty. While the socialist central government in Vietnam exercises a great deal of control over religion, the power of local authorities to harass and intimidate religious groups often presents a more immediate danger.

State-Controlled Religious Organizations: Like China, Vietnam operates several state-controlled religious organizations designed to give the government complete control over religion. Officials pressure independent religious organizations to join these state-controlled religious organizations, which include the Evangelical Church of Vietnam-South.

While the existence of state-sponsored churches and other state-sponsored religious organizations may suggest that the Vietnamese government is not completely closed to religion, their function is to eliminate organic growth within religious groups and to allow the government access to control the internal affairs of churches and temples.



"WE MUST CHANGE THE OFTEN UNTOLD YET TRAGIC STORY OF VIETNAMESE CHRISTIAN REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS LIVING IN THAILAND AND AWAITING RESETTLEMENT. THESE CHRISTIANS-IN-**FLIGHT ARE VICTIMS** OF PERSECUTION IN THEIR HOMELAND, AND THEN THE TENTACLES OF THE VIETNAMESE **COMMUNIST PARTY** STRETCH INTO THAILAND TO HARASS, OPPRESS, AND EVEN SEEK EXTRADITION OF THESE CHRISTIANS BACK TO VIETNAM. THIS IS TRANSNATIONAL PERSECUTION."

-ICC STAFFER







STATE DEPARTMENT STATUS

COUNTRY STATUS

SWL

2023 SPECIAL WATCH LIST

TRAVEL ADVISORY

LEVEL 1 LEVEL 2 LEVEL 3 LEVEL 4

EXERCISE NORMAL PRECAUTIONS in Vietnam. (State Department, as of July 24, 2023)

PERSECUTION MEASURES

BLASPHEMY & ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS _____

While Vietnam may not have a law explicitly prohibiting blasphemy or religious conversion, the law does contain vague restrictions on "profaning" a religion and sharing one's faith with others.4 While the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion only probits forced conversion, officials have regularly prosecuted Christians and followers of other faiths for simply proselytizing.

In one 2023 case, an official charged a member of the Evangelical Church of Christ, an unregistered religious group, for "abusing democratic freedoms" and violating restrictions on proselytization. Other cases like this continue, casting a shadow on the definition of basic religious practice in many faith traditions, including Christianity.

POLITICS

Following the Chinese government's pattern of abuse against religion, socialist Vietnam works to ensure government control in every corner of society. As in many communist or socialist countries, religion in Vietnam is considered a competing loyalty, a threat to national security, and an affront to the government.

While estimates vary, data indicate that most of the country's population — 85% or more — does not practice a religion. This allows the government to focus powerfully on religion, singling out followers of registered and unregistered religious groups alike for close supervision and strict controls.

ARRESTS & IMPRISONMENTS

While exact numbers are unknown and the figures are constantly changing, it is estimated that Vietnam has about 160 political and religious prisoners.⁵ In many cases, their crimes involve disfavored speech, including speaking out for religious groups and defending human rights. The government works vigorously to stifle free and independent speech, including by journalists and social media users.

Sentences for prisoners of conscience are harsh, often stretching for years, and prisoners can be detained in inhumane conditions at locations far from home, making family visits difficult or impossible. Some are forced to labor in dangerous conditions, with prisoners being used in the harvesting and processing of cashews. Raw cashews contain urushiol, the oil found in poison ivy, and inmates report severe reactions because of sustained exposure to the toxic compound and a lack of the necessary protective equipment.

New Communist Leader Seen as Threat to Vietnamese Christians Aug. 7, 2024

On Aug. 3, Vietnamese President To Lam was elected as the country's next Communist Party general secretary, a move that concerns religious freedom advocates.

In his acceptance speech, the 66-year-old reaffirmed his commitment to Vietnam's communist ideologies. Lam previously led Vietnam's Ministery of Public Security, an agency known for its continuous crackdown on human rights activists and minority religions, such as Christianity.

"This move is bad news for Christians in Vietnam and Vietnamese Christians from minority ethnic groups who have fled Vietnam to other nations," an International Christian Concern (ICC) staffer said. "To Lam's record against Vietnamese Christians and human rights defenders is well documented. As a ministry supporting and strengthening suffering Christians, we must watch Vietnam even closer to ensure Christians there can endure the coming trials they are almost certain to face under this new Communist Party leadership."

11 Imprisoned Vietnamese Christians Missing July 5, 2024

Eleven Vietnamese Christians who were imprisoned for religious activity and religious identity in the Southeast Asian nation are missing, prompting concerns over the treatment of detained Christ followers in Vietnam.

The 11 men, consisting of six Protestants and five Catholics, were sentenced, at different times, to a combined total of 90 years and eight months in prison dating back as far as 2011 and as recently as 2016. Now, their whereabouts are a mystery.

Protestants Ro Mah Pla, Siu Hlom, Rmah Bloanh, and Rmah Khil were accused of "undermining national unity policy" due to their involvement in Degar Protestantism, a religious movement that is unapproved by the Communist Vietnamese regime.



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

Vietnamese Christian Convicted for Hosting Prayer Meetings Feb. 6, 2024

International Christian Concern and human rights groups are calling for the immediate release of Vietnamese Christian Nay Y Blang after he was recently sentenced to more than four years in prison for allegedly holding prayer meetings at his home.

Blang, 48, is a member of the Central Highlands Evangelical Church of Christ which is not an official religious group authorized by the Vietnamese Communist Party. Christians outside of the government system face greater scrutiny and often false charges for their faith.

The court found Blang guilty of "abusing democratic freedoms and belief freedoms to entice and incite others to infringe upon the interests of the State, legitimate rights and interests of agencies, organizations, and individuals."

Vietnamese Christians Feature Heavily in Latest Prisoners of Conscience List

In the latest prisoners list recently released from the advocacy group Defend the Defenders (DTD), Vietnamese Christians again feature prominently. DTD statistics noted that 258 prisoners of conscience were imprisoned or on home detention sentences across Vietnam. Over one-quarter of these prisoners are from the predominantly Christian minority Montagnard and Hmong ethnic

DTD showed that all these prisoners have been harassed, imprisoned, and arrested because of exercising their right to freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and religion or belief. This comes at odds with the Vietnamese Communist Party's Marxist regime. The list includes bloggers, lawyers, unionists, land rights activists, political dissidents, and rel

14,000 Gather in Vietnam for Evangelism

Event March 6, 2023

Over 14,000 people in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, attended the Spring Love Festival hosted by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association from March 4-5.

The event has made history as the first time the Communist Vietnamese government has given permission for an evangelistic outreach with a foreign speaker outside of a holiday.

Rev. Franklin Graham, who is the president and CEO of the association, shared with the crowd, "God makes and creates you and loves you and Vietnam. Jesus is in the city tonight."

ICC @ WORK

In 2024, ICC learned of the growing yet often untold crisis facing hundreds of persecuted Christian families who have escaped to Thailand seeking refugee status. We helped dozens of Vietnamese Christian families who are now living in Thailand, hoping to be resettled to a safer new home and nation. Unfortunately, the refugee system is slow, and many live in limbo for years on end, waiting for their refugee case to be heard. They live in poor conditions, face discrimination, cannot do paid work, and are also harassed by officials from their home countries. ICC staff visited these Christians to better understand their needs as refugees. ICC is developing more projects and initiatives to support these persecuted Christians, particularly those from Vietnamese minority Christian groups, who are now languishing as refugees in Thailand.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Steeped in decades of communist tradition, the Vietnamese government attempts to keep religion at arm's length, allowing it in some form but viewing it with suspicion and relegating it to the corners of society. Since the early days of the modern Vietnamese state in the 1950s and continuing since the fall of South Vietnam in the 1970s, religion has been tightly regulated in the Southeast Asian country.

As is commonly the case in socialist states — including China and North Korea — Vietnam allows some semblance of religion in the form of tightly-controlled registered religious groups. Though the level of control exerted over these groups may not be as extreme as that found in North Korea or China, Vietnam requires that groups seeking official approval comply with an invasive multi-year registration process and avoid any activities deemed contrary to national security and unity — a vague requirement that gives authorities great latitude to restrict legitimate religious expression.

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 existence. Leaders and members of these groups, including many protestant Christians, are subject to spurious legal charges, arrests, 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, according to a 2023 report from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

The international community often overlooks the issues in Vietnam. After being designated as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) twice in 2004 and 2005, Vietnam dropped off the U.S. Department of State's CPC list in 2006 and has not returned, though they were added to the lower-level Special Watchlist in 2022.

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REPORTS



State Department

2023 Country Reports on **Human Rights Practices:** Vietnam



USCIRF

State-Controlled Religion and Religious Freedom in Vietnam

PROVIDING HOPE FOR PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS AROUND THE WORLD

WE SERVE AND EQUIP PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS IN PLACES WHERE IT IS DANGEROUS TO FOLLOW JESUS.

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO PERSECUTION MINISTRY THROUGH ADVOCACY, ASSISTANCE, AND AWARENESS.

WE ASSIST

We help ease the suffering of persecuted believers, churches, and communities by coming alongside with assistance in their time of greatest need. We care for survivors and equip the church in the most hostile areas to Christianity in the world.

WE ADVOCATE

We create tangible change and push back on persecution by seeking to influence policies and legislation, working with leaders and calling out countries that persecute Christians and violate religious freedom for all.

WE AWAKEN

We awaken the global Church to the suffering of persecuted Christians through first-person investigative reporting, daily news updates, story-driven content, and ICC's monthly magazine.

WHAT SETS ICC APART?

NIMBLE: Our team and in-country staff can respond quickly to the needs of persecuted Christians in crisis.

INTEGRITY: We have a 4-Star Charity Navigator Rating with about 30 years in ministry.

LONG-TERM CARE: We work with survivors for the long term when needed but don't create dependency.

MINISTRY FIRST: We focus on ministry over fundraising, serving the Lord and the persecuted first. We believe funds follow Godly work.

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP: Our team and pool of ICC Fellows, who are leading academics on persecution and religious freedom, prepare comprehensive reports that cover all facets of persecution.

NEWSROOM: Our domestic and overseas staff compile weekly media briefs about global Christian persecution.

WHAT WE DO

WE RESCUE Christians who are in crisis and under attack.

WE SUPPORT pastors and their families who are harassed or unjustly thrown in jail.

WE AID believers through emergency relief, small businesses, communal farms, education, and job training.

WE BUILD the church in countries where Christians are a minority. As examples, we support front line workers who witness to Muslims and Hindus, share the gospel in North Korea, smuggle Bibles into places hostile to Christianity, and train and send evangelists to remote areas in heavily persecuted countries.

WE ADVOCATE for persecuted believers by working with U.S. government leaders to pass legislation and pressure foreign regimes opposed to Christianity.

WE STIR HEARTS in the West by sharing inspirational stories of how the Lord is working in the lives of persecuted believers.

WE GIVE HOPE to those who are persecuted for simply following Christ.

WE ARE PRESENT as we listen, pray, and share God's love with believers who are suffering.

SOURCES OF PERSECUTION

SATAN/EVIL

The Bible tells us that the "adversary" is active in trying to stop the gospel and God's church: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Eph. 6:12 NIV)."

HINDU NATIONALISM

The Indian government promotes Hindu nationalism at the expense of Christianity and other faiths.

LAWS

Blasphemy and anti-conversion laws are used as legal tools to stop the spread of Christianity.

CULTURAL INTOLERANCE

Christians are often castigated and face hostilities because of their Biblical views on marriage, gender, sanctity of life, and more.

RADICAL ISLAM

Islamist fundamentalists are intolerant toward other faiths, and Christians suffer in countries where jihadists thrive, such as Iran, Sudan, and Indonesia.

MARXISM

In communist countries like Cuba, China, Vietnam, and North Korea, Christians are targeted because of their allegiance to Christ instead of their country's Marxist regime.

TYPES OF PERSECUTION

DIRECT

Arrests, imprisonment, and torture; assassination and martyrdom; restrictions on churches and Bibles; forced conversions; attacks on life and property; crimes against women.

INDIRECT

Education discrimination; job discrimination; denial of rights; legal restrictions; anti-conversion and blasphemy laws.

WHO WE ARE

OUR STAFF ICC is a global ministry with about 100 staff members and subcontractors. About 20 full-time staffers are based in the United States, including at its head-quarters near Washington, D.C. Regional directors (Africa, Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia), country directors, and project coordinators oversee indigenous staff to assist victims and report attacks. Advocates work closely with government officials on Capitol Hill and the U.S. Department of State to serve persecuted Christians.

President Jeff King has served ICC since 2003 and is the face of the organization. King is a leading expert on Christian persecution and has advocated for believers in the halls of Congress, the U.S. Department of State, churches, and everywhere in between. Jeff has met with victims in more than 70 countries and has given many media interviews. He recently authored "The Whisper" and has written "Last Words of the Martyrs" and "Islam Uncensored."





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OUR MISSION: Since 1995, ICC has served the global persecuted church through a three-pronged approach of advocacy, awareness, and assistance. ICC exists to bandage the wounds of persecuted Christians and to build the church in the toughest parts of the world.

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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