

World Watch Research

Colombia: Background Information

September 2024



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September 2024

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Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



Colombia: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
52,341,000	49,693,000	94.9

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

In 2018, Ivan Duque Márquez (of the Democratic Center Party) became the youngest-ever president of Colombia (he was born in 1976). In August 2022, he handed over to his successor, Gustavo Petro, a former M-19 guerilla fighter, who won the [presidential election](#) in June 2022 (The Guardian, 20 June 2022) - see below *Security situation*.

Widespread dissatisfaction with President Iván Duque's administration escalated and towards the end of 2019 nationwide [demonstrations](#) took place which were led by students, indigenous leaders and unions. The protests focused on political, social, economic and security issues (The Guardian, 4 December 2019). During the demonstrations that continued into 2020, the protestors were joined by [illegal armed groups](#). The commander of the ELN's Western War Front, confirmed in a video posted on social media networks, that ELN teams were active in the vandalism occurring during the September protests (La Opinion, 24 September 2020).

In 202, contact with the Andean Community, the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Pacific Alliance was strengthened. In April 2020, Colombia officially became the [37th member](#) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 28 April 2020). Colombia also joined other Latin American countries in the Forum for the Progress of South America (ProSur) in supporting initiatives for the adoption of a global response to pandemics (Andina, 26 May 2020).

The lock-down measures introduced to combat the spread of COVID-19 had a negative impact on Colombia's economy and in other areas. In April 2021, nationwide demonstrations took place once again, driven first by the [rejection](#) of a tax reform proposal and continued later in response to the government's violent action against protesters (New York Times, 27 May 2021). Despite [dialogue](#) taking place between the government and Colombia's National Strike Committee (CNP), made up mainly of unions, the talks were abandoned when no concrete agreements seemed possible (La Prensa Latina, 6 June 2021).

In August 2022, Gustavo Petro took over the presidency and in February 2023, the Peruvian Congress declared him [persona non grata](#) for his statements against Peru's national police force during demonstrations against the government of the current president of Peru, Dina Boluarte. In the past, Petro had sided with former President Pedro Castillo, who has been facing legal charges for the crimes of rebellion and conspiracy (BBC News, 18 February 2023). The relationship between Gustavo Petro and Nayib Bukele, president of El Salvador, is also tense. Some analysts [argue](#) that the two presidents are "in competition for regional leadership in Latin America, above all, in terms of ideological and political regional leadership" (VOA, 20 May 2023).

In March 2024, the Colombian government announced the [expulsion](#) from the country of a group of diplomats from the Argentine embassy, in response to President Javier Milei's accusations against President Gustavo Petro. However, no further diplomatic measures were taken (El Nuevo Siglo, 29 March 2024).

In May 2024, due to the humanitarian crisis caused by the ongoing Hamas-Israel war in Gaza, President Gustavo Petro announced that Colombia was [breaking](#) diplomatic relations with Israel (Cancillería, 1 May 2024).

Political and legal landscape

In June 2022, Gustavo Petro, presidential candidate for the Historical Pact, won the elections in a second round with more than 50% of the vote (The Guardian, 20 June 2022). It is the first time that Colombia has a 'leftist' president. In addition, Francia Márquez, a defender of human and environmental rights, is the first Afro-Colombian woman to be elected as vice president. Gustavo Petro's 54 page government plan stated that the new administration would protect religious diversity and guarantee all citizens the conditions for the exercise of equality and freedom of worship according to their religious beliefs (Government Plan 2022- 2026, no date). Likewise, it indicated that all public policies relating to equality and religious freedom would be harmonized with the Constitution and the law. The president-elect took office on 7 August 2022.

The main political issues in the first two years of President Petro's mandate were:

- **Tax reform:** As of January 2023, the tax reform, which was approved at the end of 2022, entered into force. This tax reform is expected to bring in close to \$20 billion pesos in the first year and reach \$23 billion pesos in 2026. It includes the elimination of tax exemptions, the expansion of the tax base, ending the deductibility of income tax royalties and the creation of health taxes on soft drinks and ultra-processed foods (Semana, 2 January 2023).
- **Relations with Venezuela** (i.e., the re-opening of trade and diplomatic relations as reported by El País on 26 September 2022): In January 2023, Gustavo Petro and Nicolás Maduro issued a joint declaration announcing, among other things, that Venezuela would act as a guarantor country for Colombia in the process of maintaining bilateral peace. This declaration concluded negotiations on the Agreement regarding the Promotion and Reciprocal Protection of Investments and promised the opening of all border crossings (Presidencia de la República, 7 January 2023). 24 September 2023 marked one year since the full re-establishment of diplomatic, political and commercial relations between the two countries (Presidencia, 24 September 2023).
- **Governance:** A ministerial crisis emerged in 2023 with the unexpected dismissal of 10 of President Petro's 18 ministers. This is a sign of his cabinet's instability and ineffectiveness in pushing reforms (CNN, 26 April 2023). The government coalition does not enjoy a majority in the Senate but maintains does control a majority in the Chamber. In the Chamber it has 102 of the 187 representatives (55%), whereas in the Senate 48 of the 106 senators are from the government coalition (45%) (PARES, 25 January 2024).
- **Planned reforms:** The government is seeking to promote a package of reforms in Congress to modify the health, pension and labor systems. In April 2024, the Senate dropped the bill that sought to reform the health system (El País, 3 April 2024); later, in May 2024, the president announced that they would present the bill again, with a message of urgency (La Republica, 9 May 2024). In April 2024, the Senate approved the Pension Reform Project. Congressional approval is pending for the reform to become law (France, 24 April 2024). In June 2024, the educational reform was approved unanimously in the third debate by the First Commission of the Senate, only one debate is needed in the Senate Plenary for it to become law (Infobae, 5 June 2024).

According to surveys by Invamer Poll, by April 2024, 60% of Colombians disapproved of the Petro administration, compared to 34% who approved (La Silla Vacía, 18 April 2024). The popularity of Vice President Francia Marquez fell significantly as well (Semana, 7 April 2024).

The current political crisis is also palpable at the social level. During the month of June 2023, in the midst of the corruption scandals involving the president, citizens took to the streets, in a so-called “[Majority March](#)”, in protest against the reform package promoted by the government (Infobae, 20 June 2023). In April 2024, [demonstrations](#) took place once again in different cities across the country, against the reforms promoted by the president (21 April 2024).

Regional elections took place on 29 October 2023 and candidates for the president’s Historical Pact party [failed to win the office of mayor](#) in any of the nation’s main cities and won governorships in only two small provinces along Colombia’s southern border (AP News, 30 October 2023). This clearly shows a very poor level of support for Gustavo Petro in the remainder of his governing period.

The elections were [overshadowed by increasing levels of armed conflict](#), criminality and corruption (Pares, 30 April 2023). According to a report by the Peace & Reconciliation Foundation: From 29 October 2022 to 25 October 2023, [325 victims of electoral violence were recorded](#): Of the total victims (325), 37 were murdered, 51 suffered an attack and 236 were threatened (Pares, 26 October 2023).

Peace process

Towards the end of Ivan Duque's mandate, the implementation of peace agreements and the fight against corruption were the most dominant issues for the government. The peace process was slower than expected; in the period December 2022 - November 2023, the [Kroc Institute](#) reported the following regarding the status of implementation of the peace agreements (Curate ND, May 2024):

- “578 provisions make up the Final Agreement. As of November 2023, 32% completed their implementation, 19% were in an intermediate state, 39% were in a minimum state and 10% had not yet started their implementation. These data show that at the seventh year of implementation, 49% of the provisions of the Final Agreement do not show significant progress and do not appear to be on a viable trajectory for compliance before the established deadline expires.”

In Congress, all ex-guerrillas are grouped together in the political party called “Comunes”. However, their presence in Congress is currently still a result of the Peace Agreement and not through any form of democratic voting. From 2026 onwards, they will [need to achieve](#) the necessary voter support to remain in Congress (El Tiempo, 1 October 2021).

Gender perspective

Military service is [mandatory](#) for men in Colombia for a period of 18-24 months (World Population Review, 2023). There are some [exemptions](#), such as physically or cognitively impaired people or some indigenous groups (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, accessed 26 May 2023). Other groups such as religious leaders are also exempt in peace time. According to the [US State Department IRFR 2023 Colombia](#), religious leaders expressed continued concern regarding a law requiring interagency commissions to evaluate requests for conscientious objector status. Religious organizations reported mixed enforcement of the conscientious objector law, stating that some objectors were still required to serve in the military, although they were exempt from carrying a weapon. The Ministry of Defense

reported that by the end of 2023, it had approved 90 of 171 applications seeking conscientious objector status on religious grounds.

Men and women have equal rights in relation to marriage, divorce and guardianship of children. Legislation is insufficient concerning child marriage however, permitting marriage of children over 14 with parental approval (Civil Code 1974). 23% of girls are married by 18 according to [Girls Not Brides Colombia](#) (accessed 24 June 2024) with such marriages being more prevalent among indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. As part of the 2016 peace agreement between the government and FARC, gender and women’s rights provisions were included in the peace deal. Progress in implementing these provisions has, however, been slow and women continue to face high levels of insecurity and violence; female human rights defenders are particularly vulnerable to attack ([Index on Censorship, 10 March 2023](#)).

Religious landscape

Colombia: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	49,693,000	94.9
Muslim	28,000	0.1
Hindu	13,700	0.0
Buddhist	2,300	0.0
Ethnic religionist	337,000	0.6
Jewish	5,000	0.0
Bahai	86,300	0.2
Atheist	138,000	0.3
Agnostic	1,525,000	2.9
Other	512,700	1.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

The [1991 Constitution](#) guarantees freedom of religion and states that every person enjoys the right to profess their own belief individually or collectively (Article 19). There is no official state religion; all religious denominations are equal by law; the state does however maintain a concordat with the Holy See. The Roman Catholic Church continues to enjoy privileged status compared to other religious denominations. The authorities maintain an [open dialogue](#) with representatives of the Catholic Church to discuss issues such as the defense of the Concordat Law, the protection of the right to religious and worship freedom, conscientious objection in various contexts, as well as the participation of the Catholic Church in public policy on Religious Freedom and Worship (Vatican News, 27 April 2022).

In 1998, the Colombian authorities also signed an [agreement](#) (entitled Decree 354) with 13 non-Catholic Christian groups (El Herald, 2 August 2019). Among other things, this decree gives legally binding recognition of marriages and the guarantee that property used for worship cannot be seized by the state.

Churches that do not join those covered by [Decree 354](#) may choose to request recognition of their legal status and be registered in the Public Registry of the Ministry of Interior (Minterior, February 1998). This allows them to collect funds, receive donations, establish religious education institutions, perform religious services (excluding legally registered marriages) and directly enter into agreements with public or private entities, foundations, national and/or international organizations for the development of social and educational projects. However, unregistered entities can carry out religious activities without penalty but may not collect financial support or receive non-monetary private donations. During preparations for the latest tax reform, an attempt was made to make churches pay [20% income tax](#) where they carry out activities not related to worship, but the inclusion of this article failed (El Comercio, 10 November 2022). In June 2023, the government signed an [agreement with 8 religious organizations](#) giving them the authority to celebrate religious marriages with civil effect, and to provide religious services in prisons and hospitals (La República, 7 June 2023). The government is currently also [working on an agreement](#) that would make the process more flexible for registered churches to enter into a contract with the State to carry out educational and social assistance for needy citizens (Infobae, 31 March 2024). Also, in October 2023, the Senate of the Republic of Colombia held a hearing to [consider the recognition of victims](#) of the armed conflict belonging to the religious sector (Senado, 18 October 2023).

The positive role played by church and other religious leaders in the country is recognized by state authorities. Since the [signing of the Final Agreement](#) between the government and FARC in September/November 2016 (The Guardian, 24 November 2016), religious communities (including Christians) have been considered valid social actors in the promotion of [dialogue and peace](#) (Semana, 10 February 2023). Currently, the Catholic Church is accompanying the peace dialogue process between the government and the ELN (See more below in: Security situation). Church leaders have functioned as active participants in the drafting of some departmental and national public policies, although this has also caused criticism from secularists and made them targets for acts of aggression. In the 2023 regional elections, the Catholic Church called on citizens to [vote](#) with conscience and keeping in mind the common good (UCN, 20 October 2023). Previously, during the elections for mayors and governors, the Catholic Church, accompanied by academia and civil society, initiated the campaign called "[¡Pilas!](#) Don't throw away the vote, for the common good". The objective was to raise awareness among citizens about the importance of well-considered voting (Vida Nueva Digital, 18 August 2023).

Some church leaders also dare to [make known](#) their knowledge of alliances between illegal armed groups and certain sectors of the government army, as well as illegal activity occurring in various departments in the country. This earns them threats not only from criminal groups but also from members of the armed forces (Religión Digital, 24 February 2022). They have also spoken out regarding the [legislative reforms](#) (El Tiempo, 7 June 2023), the [peace process](#) proposed by the government (El País, 11 January 2023), and the need to [end all violence](#) (AND Celam, 13 March 2023).

Despite public recognition of the significance of church ministry in society, there still exists a widespread [hostility](#) towards religious expression in public debates, especially if faith-based views are

expressed by public officials, including high profile public representatives (Infobae, 27 July 2020). The attempt to ban expressions of personal Christian faith made by local government staff on social media networks is based on the fear that the principle of Church-State separation is being violated.

At the judicial level there have been the following rulings which directly impact the full exercise of the right to religious freedom:

- There was a move in 2022, rejected by the Supreme Court, to have a [cross removed](#) from the Full Chamber of the Constitutional Court. It had been claimed that such crosses on display "violate the principles of secularism, human dignity, equality and due process" by demonstrating state bias towards Christian faith (OJS, 30 April, 2022).
- In contrast, in December 2023, the Constitutional Court of Colombia ordered the Directorate of Transit and Transportation of Floridablanca (Santander) to [remove](#) a statue of Saint Mary that was located on the first floor, to comply with its duty of neutrality. The existence of the statue allegedly implied an apparent identification or adherence to, as well as the promotion of, a specific religion (Corte Constitucional, 1 December 2023).
- Another relevant case is linked with a group of students from the National University of Colombia, who filed a judicial review to obtain protection of their freedom of religion, conscience and expression, the right to equality and the defense of the neutrality of the state. In 2021, the university denied endorsement of the "Reformed University Community" student project or CUR project (a Christian study group under the Christian Reformed tradition that carries out English conversation clubs, biblical studies and integration activities) on the grounds that its financing and dissemination contradicted the principle of secularism and required students to sign a declaration of commitments with which they did not agree. In the first and second instance, the judges ruled against the students. In February 2024, the Criminal Chamber of the Constitutional Court [confirmed](#) the previous rulings under the consideration that public higher education institutions have the duty to act in accordance with the principle of secularism and that the approval of the CUR Project would imply the promotion of a certain religious confession with public resources, in contradiction with the principle of secularism (Corte Constitucional, 27 February 2024).
- In April 2024, the Sectional Judicial Disciplinary Commission of Bolivar [sanctioned](#) the Tenth Municipal Civil Judge of the capital of Bolívar (Colombia), Ramiro Flórez Torres, with 15 years of disqualification from the exercise of any public function. The judge denied the request to perform a same sex marriage in 2020. The conduct of the judge, who refused due to religious convictions, was classified as serious. The justification for the severe measure was that servants of the judicial branch perform public functions and cannot excuse themselves for reasons of conscience to refrain from complying with their constitutional and legal duties (Sectional Judicial Discipline Commission, April 10, 2024).

In the name of Church-State separation, pressure groups continue to reject [faith-based statements](#) made by Christian leaders on the issues of abortion, family, marriage and religious liberty (CEC, 12 May 2022). Radical ideological pressure groups also attempt to [prevent](#) public forums taking place where content contradicts their views on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) (Semana, 25 April 2023). In March 2024, in a [second debate](#) in the House of Representatives, a bill seeking to prohibit 'Efforts to Change Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity' was approved (Cámara de Representantes,

20 March 2024). In the proposal, reference is made to these prohibited practices as: "all behavioral, psychoanalytic, medical, religious, and spiritual means and techniques that violate human dignity and whose purpose is to correct or reverse sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression of a person, unless the interventions reaffirm a person's self-perceived gender identity, do not violate human dignity, and are with their free and informed consent". Further debate is required in the Senate before the bill can be officially approved (Infobae, 20 March 2024).

Radical ideological groups often use aggressive language, vandalize churches (Alerta Bogotá, 29 September 2022) and disrupt church services. In such cases, police inaction is usual (Religion Digital, 29 September 2022). As in the previous year (2022), the US State Department IRFR 2023 Colombia stated that in 2023 several acts of vandalism against places of worship (especially against Catholic churches) were reported to the local authorities. In 2022, the Colombian Episcopal Conference also reported acts of vandalism against 15 Catholic churches in the departments of Córdoba, Cauca, Antioquia, Tolima, Boyacá, Sucre, Santander, and Bogotá. This vandalism included desecration of religious objects, theft of eucharistic chalices and paintings, and graffiti on church walls. The affected church communities reported the incidents to the police and publicized them on social media.

A series of reforms to the Penal Code were under preparation in 2022 and 2023. One of these reforms seeks to remove from the Penal Code all matters involving the violation of religious freedom, the disruption of religious ceremonies, damage or injury to person or things intended for use in worship and disrespect to the dead. As justification, it is claimed that very few complaints of such conduct have been recorded and can be dealt with through other legal means (El Espectador, 6 February 2023).

Meanwhile, insecurity in the country has a severe effect on the work of the church. In areas coopted by armed groups, the evangelistic work of Christians has exposed them to various forms of pressure and violence, such as organized smear campaigns and death threats. Other measures for silencing church leaders and putting pressure on them are forced displacement, mobility limitations, bans on holding church services and church burglary. (See more below in: *Security situation*.)

A special note about 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' in indigenous communities

Within some indigenous communities, the religious factor is an important component of their culture and identity and shapes their relationships with other people and even natural resources. As in many indigenous communities in Latin America, the religious practices are mostly related to syncretistic practices adapted from Roman Catholic rites. In some cases, they identify themselves as Catholics and indigenous leaders tend to be more receptive to the presence of Roman Catholic members than with Christians from other denominations. In many other cases, the spirituality of the ethnic group includes rites related to animism and takes on a hostile stand against local Christians. However, in all these cases, any type of preaching or religious activity requires permission from the leaders. Anything going against the customs of the ethnic group will be punished. Due to the general acceptance of Catholic traditions inside indigenous communities, most 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' are of Protestant or Evangelical origin.

In indigenous communities, Christians face opposition where they reject the religious practices and customs of the ethnic group to which they belong, especially if they are related with animism rites. This has led to indigenous leaders often seeing Christian influences from outside as a destabilizing

element. Since ethnic leaders are those who administer justice in their territories, religious freedom of indigenous people is not duly guaranteed by local (state) authorities where it concerns a religion differing from the community one. Therefore - and only with regard to indigenous people - those adhering to 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' refer in this country dossier to those Christians who refuse to follow the ancestral or traditional beliefs of the ethnic group to which they belong because it contradicts their faith. Thus, when syncretistic religious customs related to Roman Catholic rites (or ancestral religious customs that worship nature) are practiced in the indigenous community or participation in and attendance at animism rituals is required, they refuse to participate and consequently face hostility and rejection. The victims of hostile acts are believers and their families, including children, who can become victims of discrimination even in their schools. (See below: *Clan oppression*)

Christian Solidarity Worldwide notes that most of the ongoing violations of FoRB taking place in indigenous communities can be directly linked to the 1998 Constitutional Court decision, Ruling SU-510, which gave primacy to the collective cultural right to protect traditions and culture over individual rights, specifically the right to FoRB. According to CSW, this decision was referenced especially by indigenous leaders who held the stance that nontraditional religions should not be allowed on indigenous lands. CSW mentions that indigenous individuals of religious minority groups experienced varying forms of discrimination by Indigenous community members and leaders and there are occasions when indigenous Protestant Christians faced threats, harassment, bullying, arbitrary detention and torture from their fellow indigenous community based on their religious beliefs, driving them to flee their communities (CSW, 7 December 2022). Although the reporting period of that document covers periods in 2021 and 2022, the situation still continues in some Indigenous communities in the country, as confirmed by Open Doors research.

Additionally, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) mentioned that in the case of indigenous peoples and people of African descent, violence by non-state armed groups and criminal organizations, including disregard for their authorities, displacement and territorial dispossession, affect their physical and cultural survival. These groups force them to become associated with illicit economies and impose restrictions on their customs, forcing them to abandon the ancestral practices that underpin their well-being, cultural identity and autonomy (Reliefweb, 6 March 2023). According to Open Doors research, this also affects multiple dimensions of their religious freedom.

Economic landscape

According to UNDP's Human Development Report for Colombia (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Gross national income per capita (2022):** 15,014
- **GNI per capita (2022):** 12,252 for women; 17,854 for men
- **Inequality in income (2022):** 44.2%
- **Population vulnerable to multidimensional poverty:** 6.2%. However, according to data published by the National Department Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE, 19 April 2024): "In 2023, the incidence of multidimensional poverty in the country was 12.1%, -0.8 percentage points less than in 2022 (12.9%)".

According to the [World Bank Colombia overview](#) (last updated 4 April 2024):

- “Colombia’s solid macroeconomic institutional setting, grounded on a rules-based fiscal framework, a flexible exchange rate, and a modern inflation-targeting regime, has been the cornerstone of its macroeconomic stability. Yet, the pace of economic growth has been slowing. Colombia has significant potential to enhance its contribution to GDP growth by increasing productivity and further diversifying and expanding its exports. Addressing infrastructure gaps, improving educational outcomes, and strengthening institutions are crucial steps to further boosting the country's economic development.”
- “Macroeconomic imbalances that surfaced during a strong post-pandemic economic recovery are correcting rapidly, with declining inflation and fiscal and external deficits. The economy expanded 0.6% in 2023, as the needed un-winding of stimulus policies and heightened policy uncertainty affected fixed investment. The poverty rate is estimated to have remained stagnant in 2023, as labor markets showed limited improvements. The economy is projected to expand 1.3 percent in 2024.”

According to [World Bank's Global Economic Prospects](#) (January 2024):

- “Colombia’s growth is expected to increase from 1.2 percent in 2023 to 1.8 percent in 2024 and 3 percent in 2025, close to the economy’s potential growth rate. The central bank is expected to cut interest rates later than its regional peers in the face of persistent inflation. As a result, private consumption and investment growth are not expected to gather pace until 2025.”

Unemployment and Economic growth

- According to the Unemployment Rates Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the unemployment rate for Colombia was 11.2 % in March 2024 ([OECD, 14 May 2024](#)).
- According to the National Administrative Department of Statistics, in the first quarter of 2024, the Gross Domestic Product in its original series grows 0.7% compared to the same period in 2023. So far in 2024, the Gross Domestic Product in its series adjusted for seasonal and calendar effects grows 1.1% ([DANE, 15 May 2024](#)). In April 2024, the national total unemployment rate was 10.6%, while in April 2023 it was 10.7% ([DANE, July 2024](#)).
- The Colombia report published by the Circle of Latin American Studies ([CESLA, November 2023](#)) shows that in November 2023 the Colombian economy contracted by -0.3% in the third quarter. The sectors with the greatest contractions were construction (-8.0%), manufacturing industry (-6.2%), commerce (-3.5%), communications (-1.2%) and professional activities (-0.8%). Despite the poor performance of production, a downward trend in unemployment has been consolidated in 2023. Colombia had an annual inflation rate of less than 10% between 1999 and 2021. However, after the pandemic there was accelerated growth in domestic consumption that produced inflation growth above 10%, after two decades of having it under control. Annual inflation was above 10% during the second half of 2022 and began its decline only in April 2023, but in October it was still at 10.48%. This behavior of consumption and its effects on inflation led the Bank of the Republic to raise the interest rate to discourage consumption that was largely financed with debt.

- The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development ([OECD, November 2023](#)) expects that GDP growth in Colombia will be 1.2% in the full year 2023 and that by 2024 the growth will be 1.4%. High interest rates and political uncertainty are the main factors hindering investment. In addition, there has been a tightening of financial conditions as financing costs have increased and lending criteria have become stricter. Private consumption, a key driver of the strong recovery after the pandemic, has also weakened. For the moment, the slowdown has not transferred to the labor market, where the unemployment rate is 1.5 percentage points below pre-pandemic levels.

In November 2022, the tax reform proposed by Gustavo Petro was approved. According to the president, the objective of this reform was to reduce tax benefits for the highest earners and make income redistribution possible to the most vulnerable. The reform basically makes those with more income pay more taxes ([DIAN, November 2022](#)). A proposed tax on church activities not directly involving worship was scrapped. The main changes were ([CNN, 4 November 2022](#)):

- Prison sentences of between 4 and 9 years were introduced for tax evaders;
- A tax on single-use plastics was approved for the sale and import of products;
- A tax was placed on sugary drinks;
- An income surcharge for oil companies was created.

Humanitarian assistance distributed by churches and other civil society organizations to vulnerable sectors of the population has been possible. Aid has been distributed to the migrant population ([CEC, 29 May 2023](#)), to people with low economic resources ([CEC, 13 April 2023](#)), and to victims of natural disasters ([CEC, 19 January 2023](#)), among others. This has helped ease the pressure on government resources in some areas. However, this work is seriously hampered by the presence of criminal groups in certain areas. These groups, in addition to being the cause of violence and mass displacement, often obstruct humanitarian workers, limiting their access people in need. Between January and July 2023, restrictions on mobility and access to essential goods affected more than 591,067 people, representing 98% percent of the people affected in humanitarian access events. The restrictions were registered in 12 departments, including Antioquia, Caquetá, Chocó, Magdalena, Nariño and Guaviare, due to the control exercised by Non-State Armed Groups (GANE) and the deepening of governance over the communities ([OCHA, 22 August 2023](#)). In some rural areas, Christian families also face mobility restrictions imposed by criminal groups, which limit their access to their crops and other livelihood activities such as fishing.

Despite the economic crisis, a way churches help the economy is by generating employment. According to the National Department of Statistics, [260,000 formal jobs have been generated](#) by more than 5,000 religious organizations that have a presence in the country. Work among the elderly is a particular focus (Bluradio, 4 April 2022).

Gender perspective

In general, women remain the most economically vulnerable in Colombia with unemployment rates about 1.6 times higher than that of men ([World Bank Colombia data](#), accessed 24 June 2024). Over the past decades, significant improvements have been made in relation to education opportunities for

girls in Colombia, such that there is now gender parity and perhaps, an even slight margin in favor of women with regard to average number of years of education received. Whilst women continue to have fewer work opportunities, the number of women in the workforce is also on the rise. However, it remains challenging for women to attain high profile positions, such as governmental posts; candidates are also vulnerable to threats and attacks. Statistics from Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) suggest that about 70% of women in politics in Colombia face various forms of violence including verbal, sexual and psychological violence ([NIMD, 12 November 2022](#)). Despite the challenges, elections held in 2022 saw record numbers of female candidates and women elected to Congress; Colombia is one of 13 countries in the world where 50% or more of women cabinet members also serve as heads of ministries ([IPU, 7 March 2023](#)).

Men also face economic challenges as the primary financial providers and are often targeted for extortion by criminal groups and fines. Ongoing investigations reveal the armed forces carried out [widespread extrajudicial killings](#) between 2002 and 2008, predominantly targeting civilians and men in particular, who they knowingly mislabeled as enemy combatants (BBC News, 27 April 2022).

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Colombia](#) (accessed 24 June 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Mestizo and White 87.6%, Afro-Colombian (includes Mulatto, Raizal, and Palenquero) 6.8%, Amerindian 4.3%, unspecified 1.4% (2018 est.).
- **Main language:** Spanish (official) 98.9%, indigenous 1%, portuguese 0.1%; 65 indigenous languages exist (2023 est.).
- **Urban population:** 82.4% of the total population (2023)
- **Literacy rate:** 95.6% of the total population.
- **Population below poverty line:** 39.3% (2021 est.).

According to [World Bank Colombia data](#) (accessed 24 June 2024):

- **Education:** The school enrollment for primary (2022) is 105% and for secondary (2022) is 102%. The duration of compulsory education is 12 years (2023).
- **School Gender Parity Index (GPI) (2020):** 1.01. This refers to the ratio of girls to boys enrolled at primary and secondary levels in public and private schools.
- **Unemployment:** 9.6% (2023) Modeled ILO estimate.

According to [UNDP HDR Colombia](#) (Data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** Colombia's HDI value for 2022 was 0.758, which put the country in the 'high' human development category.
- **Life expectancy (2022):** 77.1 female and 70.3 male.
- **Gender inequality (2022):** Colombia has a 2022 Gender Inequality Index value of 0.392, ranking it 95 out of 193 countries.

The indigenous population

According to the most recent National Population and [Housing Census](#) published in 2018 by the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE, 30 June 2018), 4.4% of the Colombian

population regard themselves as indigenous: 1,905,617 citizens (distributed in 115 native indigenous people distributed over a large part of the national territory), a rise of 1% compared to the 2005 Census. The State recognizes the autonomy and self-determination of indigenous groups, which means that the indigenous populations establish and regulate their norms of coexistence. Hence, ethnic leaders attempt to impose a lifestyle regulated by their ancestral customs and act as the only authority in the area.

In 2024, a decree is being analyzed that would allow indigenous peoples to manage their territories, establish their own authorities, uses and customs, as well as the creation of a health and educational system that adapts to the traditional practices of these communities ([Infobae, 12 June 2024](#)).

Humanitarian emergencies

According to the Urban Vulnerability Conditions Indicator, developed by the Urban Development Directorate of the National Planning Department, 14.5% of households are in a condition of [urban vulnerability](#) and almost 50% of the most vulnerable households are in the Caribbean. 25% of the total national urban households classified as having the highest urban vulnerability are found in 16 municipalities in the country (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 27 July 2023). The most vulnerable sectors, especially the rural and indigenous sectors, do not have minimum public services and social infrastructure. State support is often minimal; in addition, endemic corruption between criminal groups and local authorities is so established that it adds to the continuity of multidimensional poverty and in some territories represents a serious obstacle to the distribution of aid. In most cases, violence is most acute in rural areas.

According to a report by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - OCHA, from January to March 2022, the humanitarian impact caused by armed violence greatly affected the [civilian population](#) (Children and armed conflict, 13 March 2024). Given the severe impact of the armed conflict on indigenous communities, the Humanitarian Team of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Colombia, in consultation with indigenous representatives, prepared a '[Strategy](#) to Promote Humanitarian Management with Indigenous Peoples' with the intention of raising awareness of the humanitarian situation of indigenous peoples throughout the national territory. The Strategy considers their particular vulnerability due to non-state armed actors and the impact of environmental disasters on their territories (Reliefweb, 24 February 2023).

"Between January and April of [2024], approximately [72,700](#) victims were reported resulting from massive emergencies such as confinements (51,000 people) and massive displacements (24,300 people) in 49 municipalities in 10 departments, of which at least 2,600 people have suffered twice over by suffering from these events at the same time. Additionally, people belonging to ethnic communities concentrate 62% of the impact (indigenous with 41% and Afro-Colombians with 22%), especially in the Pacific." (OCHA, 14 June 2024).

A number of NGOs have declared a humanitarian and human rights emergency throughout the country. As reported by [DW on 2 June 2023](#), Colombia entered the Norwegian Refugee Council's (NRC) list of the world's most neglected humanitarian crises for the first time: "Colombia's ranking as the world's third most neglected crisis highlights the growing humanitarian needs as the protracted conflict continues to displace thousands of people. At the same time, Colombia is hosting nearly 2.5 million Venezuelans fleeing the country's growing humanitarian crisis".

As described above (in: *Economic landscape*), Christian communities and church leaders are active in bringing humanitarian aid to impoverished families, although this work is seriously hampered by the presence of criminal groups in certain areas.

The refugee/migrant situation

According to a [UNHCR Factsheet](#) published in May 2023:

- "Refugees and migrants of multiple nationalities travel or walk through Colombia from (1) the border points with Venezuela and Ecuador; (2) large Colombian cities, such as Barranquilla, Bogotá, Cali or Medellín, and/or (3) rural areas; heading towards the Gulf of Urabá to cross the border with Panama and reach Central or North America. In addition to the routes through the Darién Gap, there are also people attempting to cross along the Pacific Coast, via Juradó, and through the Caribbean Sea, via San Andrés and Providencia Islands."
- "The trend of people on the move passing through Colombia onwards to Panama and North America has continued to increase significantly in 2023. While in 2022, 248,284 people crossed from Colombia to Panama, in 2023 (Jan-Apr) 127,687 people have crossed, reaching more than 50% of all the movements registered in 2022. In addition, the country experienced an exponential increase in the Venezuelan population in transit during the last two years (150,327 people crossed into Panama in 2022 and 55,590 in 2023, compared to 2,819 in 2021), similar to the situation in 2021, when the peak was of Haitian nationals (82,000)."

The Government of Colombia announced on 8 February 2021 the [Temporary Protection Status](#) (TPS) that enables over 2.3 million Venezuelans to access rights and services over the course of 10 years in the country (UNHCR, March 2023).

The Catholic bishops of Colombia have also appealed for solidarity and encouraged the governments of Colombia and Venezuela to [resume binational relations](#) in order to respond effectively to the migrant crisis (CNA, 26 May 2022). In the same way, Christian networks and organizations repeatedly raise [attention](#) to the need to care for migrants (CAN, 10 May 2023) and have made constant calls for [peace](#) (Aciprensa, 2 May 2024). A meeting of Catholic bishops on the border between Colombia and Venezuela was entitled "Charity on the border 2023" ([Vatican News, 18 September 2023](#)). Evangelical churches also support vulnerable communities ([El País, 12 November 2023](#)).

Recruitment

The Ombudsman's Office registered [184](#) cases of forced recruitment of minors in 2023. 110 were children and adolescents and 74 were girls and adolescents. The ages of the victims ranged between 9 and 17 years, with the highest number concentrated in the range between 14 and 17, with 123 cases. In relation to belonging, 68.4% were part of indigenous communities, this population group being the most affected by crime. (Defensoría, 13 February 2024). The Study on the Characterization of Children Disconnected from Organized Armed Groups in Colombia (2013-2022) carried out by UNICEF and the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF) reported that with the demobilization of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2016, after the peace agreements with the government, the National Liberation Army (ELN) became the [largest recruiter](#) of children and adolescents in the country, with 406 cases registered between 2013 and 2022. The wave of Venezuelan

migration, as well as the presence of the Colombian guerrillas in neighboring Venezuela, generated an increase in the recruitment of Venezuelan children (UNICEF & ICBF, May 2023).

Killings

For the period from 27 December 2023 to 26 March 2024, the United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia [reported](#) (Reliefweb, 7 April 2024) that the OHCHR received 42 allegations of killings of human rights defenders. Most of these incidents occurred in Antioquia, Cauca, Putumayo and Valle del Cauca Departments. The Mission observed a [significant increase](#) in violence against social leaders in Putumayo compared with December 2022 to March 2023 and the continuously high rate of homicides in Cauca Department (UN Mission, 27 March 2024).

The Colombian Ombudsman's Office reported that a total of 181 leaders and human rights defenders were murdered in 2023. Of the total, 160 were men and 21 were women. The most affected social sectors were the communal (37 homicides), indigenous (37), community (36), peasant (13), Afro-descendant (10), victim (9), LGBTIQ+ (7) and human rights activists. H H. (7). The 181 crimes occurred in 123 municipalities (in 25 departments). 44% of the total cases were concentrated in 80 of them. Cauca (with 36 cases), Antioquia (21) and Nariño (17) were the departments where there were the most homicides, that is, 74, which represents 41% of the global data. They were followed by Valle del Cauca (15 homicides), Córdoba (10), Putumayo (9), Norte de Santander (7), Arauca (7), Bolívar (7) and Bogotá (6) ([Defensoría del Pueblo, 9 January 2024](#)).

Concerning abortion

In August 2022, the Gustavo Petro government withdrew from the Geneva Consensus Declaration, in which a group of approximately thirty nations expressed opposition to abortion. The reason for the withdrawal, according to the Colombian Foreign Ministry, was that the country now had a legal framework [allowing](#) the practice of abortion legally and safely (Semana, 22 August 2022). In November 2022, the government [ratified](#) the Escazú Agreement, a regional agreement of the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean that mainly seeks to materialize Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development of 1992 and thus ensure (i) access to environmental information, (ii) access to environmental participation and (iii) access to environmental justice (Ámbito jurídico, 22 November 2022).

Gender perspective

Colombian men are traditionally the primary financial providers while women assume a greater share of domestic chores. A 2015 study on social acceptance of violence against women reveals that social attitudes concerning gender are changing; in 2014, 31% of respondents believed that men should be the head of the household, compared to 45% in 2009 ([OECD Library, 2020](#)). There are currently [no legal restrictions](#) against female headship (World Bank, Snapshot: Woman, Business and the Law 2023). Domestic violence nonetheless remains widespread in Colombia, and the rate of femicides reportedly increased during the COVID-19 lockdowns ([Statista](#), January 2023; [The Guardian](#), 25 January 2021).

Technological landscape

According to DataReportal [Digital 2024: Colombia](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 75.7% penetration rate
- **Social media usage:** 70.3% of the total population
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 147.5% of the total population

According to the [Ministry of Information Technologies and Communications](#), at the end of the third quarter of 2023, the total number of fixed Internet accesses in Colombia reached 8.94 million, that is more than 127 thousand new accesses than in the same quarter of 2022, when the number was 8.81 million (MinTIC, February 2024).

Data published by [OOSGA \(2023\)](#) reveals that men and women use social media at a near equal rate, with women topping certain age demographics. While male users account for about 48.7% of all Facebook users, female users account for around 51.4%. Mobile internet usage is also very similar, with 52% of men accessing the Internet through a mobile device, versus 48% of women ([Statista, 23 May 2022](#)). This shows that Christian men and women have a similar level of access to digital Christian resources and community. According to Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 89% of women in Colombia have access to a mobile phone ([GIWPS 2023 Colombia](#)).

According to [Freedom on the Net 2023 Colombia](#):

- Internet access has slightly increased in Colombia. According to data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), internet penetration stood at just over 73% in 2021. In July 2021, the government passed an amendment to existing legislation that declared the internet an “essential public service.” It requires providers to guarantee service to their customers and avoid suspending the installation, maintenance, and adaptation of their networks.
- Colombia ranks relatively high on indicators of internet affordability, especially when compared with other countries in the region. In recent years, the government has taken steps to address digital disparities. In March 2023, the MinTIC announced the Connect ICT 360 plan, which aims to provide connectivity to 85 percent of Colombians by 2026, with a focus on implementing emerging technologies and encouraging new service providers in regions affected by the digital divide.
- The Colombian government does not regularly order the removal of content, nonetheless platforms have restricted political and social content in moments of social unrest. In addition, Events of high national interest, like presidential elections, frequently prompt heightened levels of manipulated online content.
- Self-censorship is a notable problem for journalists and likely affects online publications. Journalists sometimes practice self-censorship out of fear of violence by armed groups, legal action under libel laws, or the general climate of impunity.

According to [Reporters Without Borders](#) (World Press Freedom Index 2024 Colombia):

“The government has been using social media to combat criticism from the traditional media, and senior officials have been accused of vilifying journalists. Previous cases of state surveillance and spying on journalists have yet to be addressed.”

“Studies warn of growing disinformation and the public has become disenchanted with the media’s news coverage, regarding journalists as biased. Connecting the country to the Internet has been held back by corruption within the Ministry of Technology, Information and Communication.”

“Coverage of environmental issues including the impact of mining and deforestation exposes journalists to violence, as does coverage of topics related to armed conflicts, land claims, community organization, the rights of ethnic communities and Colombia’s peace accords. Journalists’ safety is also threatened when they cover stories involving corruption, the expansion of Mexican cartels, and alliances between politicians, armed groups and the private sector. Journalists face threats and stigmatization, and even murder: two journalists were killed in 2022, one of whom was under government protection.”

In some rural areas, armed groups intercept communications. In addition, in regions such as Nudo de Paramillo and Catatumbo, armed groups check mobile phones and sometimes demand that residents, including Christians, reveal their mobile contacts, messages and other information stored on their devices. This monitoring can put others and Christians themselves at risk and increases self-censorship.

Security situation

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has [reported](#) that in Colombia there are eight non-international armed conflicts. Three conflicts are between the Colombian State and i) the National Liberation Army (ELN), ii) the Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC) and iii) the former FARC-EP currently not covered by the Peace Agreement. The other five conflicts are between non-state armed groups: one, between the ELN and the AGC; and the remaining four between the former FARC-EP currently not covered by the Peace Agreement and the Second Marquetalia, the ELN and the AGC. Similarly, the ICRC learned directly of 444 alleged violations of International Humanitarian Law and other humanitarian norms by state and non-state armed actors. These include threats, sexual violence, recruitment, use and direct participation in hostilities of children and adolescents, homicides, use of explosive devices with indiscriminate effects, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and arbitrary deprivations of liberty, among other behaviors (ICRC, February 2024).

The IACHR has also voiced its views over the violence related to the actions of non-state armed groups in Colombia. Recently, the organization expressed [concern](#) about the high levels of violence in Colombia's Pacific region, and about the impact this violence has on the rights of indigenous peoples and of Afro-descendant and peasant communities. It mentioned that this kind of violence in the area stems mostly from factors linked to historical discrimination, armed conflict, and disputes among armed groups for control of illegal economic activities. Further, this violence takes place in territories with high rates of poverty and extreme poverty where state authorities are hardly present (IACHR, 1 September 2023).

The main perpetrators of violence are organized armed groups, namely the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC) or Gulf Clan, FARC units that did not accept the peace process and FARC members who have decided to return to fight the government. In addition to these groups, there are criminal groups referred to as "Organized Armed Groups" (GAO - formerly known as BACRIM). The variety of groups, some having connections with Mexican cartels, means there is a continual struggle for gaining territory and power.

As reported by [Indepaz](#), between 2008 and 2021, narco-paramilitary groups have consolidated their activity in 216 municipalities, 232 present an occasional presence. Between 2016 and 2021, the AGC have had a permanent presence in 131 municipalities, of which 44 belong to the department of Antioquia, twenty-three to Córdoba, twenty-one to Chocó and twelve to Sucre. During the first half of 2022, activity of this group (AGC) was identified in 326 municipalities, the highest recorded during the sixteen years of monitoring carried out by Indepaz (Indepaz, 25 November 2022).

The Coexistence and Citizen Security Line of the Peace & Reconciliation Foundation [identified](#) 196 criminal organizations, of which 5 (3%) are Organized Armed Groups (GAO), 61 (31%) are Organized Crime Groups and 130 (66%) are Common Crime Groups (Pares, 15 December 2023). Not to mention, the [2005](#) (smaller) criminal gangs that operate in the main urban centers of the country (El Colombiano, 13 June 2022). There are so-called 'invisible borders' demarcated by armed groups, especially in the Pacific area, South of Bolívar, Catatumbo and Bajo Cauca.

According to Insight Crime, the ELN operates in at least [23 of the 32](#) departments in Colombia (Insight Crime, 13 November 2023). The main strongholds of the ELN are the departments of Chocó, Bolívar, Norte de Santander, and Arauca. There they control part of drug trafficking, smuggling and extortion. To a lesser extent, but with strategic positions, the ELN is also in the departments of Antioquia, Cesar, Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Nariño and Vichada. These departments are key for their coca crops, cocaine production or smuggling routes to Ecuador and Venezuela. On the other hand, the border with Venezuela has also become an important region for the ELN. The fighting between armed groups on the Colombia-Venezuela border has caused an increase in violence as well (Prensalatina, 2 February 2023). Members of the Venezuelan Bolivarian National Armed Forces and the Bolivarian National Guard have participated in joint operations with ELN guerrilla fighters and have been complicit in their abuses.

The [United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (UNHCHR, 14 February 2024) has aired his concern that “despite a decrease in some violence indicators in 2023, the continued territorial expansion and violent strategies of social and territorial control of non-state armed groups and criminal organizations against the civilian population, ethnic-territorial organizations and grassroots organizations continue to put at risk the physical and cultural survival of various peoples and historical organizational processes. The Office received 123 allegations of possible massacres in 2023. Of these, 98 were verified and 25 were considered inconclusive. An increase of 6.5% is observed compared to the verified massacres of 2022. In the verified massacres, 320 victims were registered (242 men, 46 women, 25 boys and 7 girls). Of the total victims, 18 belonged to ethnic peoples (15 indigenous and 3 Afro-descendants). The most affected departments were Antioquia, Atlántico, Cauca, Magdalena, Nariño and Valle del Cauca. In 93% of the verified massacres, the alleged perpetrators fell to non-state armed groups and criminal organizations.”

The Institute of Studies for Development and Peace (INDEPAZ) reported in June 2024 that so far in 2024, 10 signatories of the Peace Agreement (all ex-combatants) had been [murdered](#) (Indepaz, last accessed June 2024). The assassination of leaders and ex-combatants has hindered the implementation of the Final Agreement and affected the general perception of its practicality. Likewise, the murder of leaders of the National Program for the Substitution of Crops for Illicit Use has continued. Levels of fear in many communities are high due to the presence of members of the ELN, FARC and other criminal groups. In this context, the legal framework and the policies to fight corruption

are weak. Government security forces have also being accused of collaborating with or tolerating the activities of the ELN (El Colombiano, 21 February 2023).

According to the [United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA, 22 March 2024), between January and February 2024, the Local Coordination Teams (ELC) have reported nearly 30,000 victims of mass displacement and confinement that left 33 mass emergencies in 25 municipalities of 8 departments, representing a 26% increase in the number of people compared to the same period in 2023. Ethnic peoples are the ones most affected (61% represented by 38% indigenous and 24% Afro-Colombian). In the January-February 2024 period, the Pacific region has experienced most mass emergencies (Nariño, Chocó, Valle del Cauca, Cauca). It is also worth mentioning that the departments of Putumayo and Caquetá (southern of the country), Antioquia and the south of Bolívar (northwestern region) and La Guajira have seen considerable expansion of non-state armed groups.

In some instances, violence has been reported because of abuses by the national police and armed forces. It is significant that the national police are not under the command of the Ministry of the Interior or Justice, but under the Ministry of Defense, a legacy of the country's long internal armed conflict. Calls for reform have often proposed that the police force be moved out of the Defense Ministry to ensure strict civil scrutiny and ensure that civilian courts handle serious abuse cases.

According to the [United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia](#) (UN Mission in Colombia, 27 March 2024):

- "Between 27 December and 26 March, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs documented the forced displacement of 14,365 people and the confinement of 35,432 across nine Departments and 35 municipalities with a disproportionate impact on ethnic communities, which represented 64 per cent of those affected (42 per cent Indigenous people and 22 per cent Afro-Colombians). Insecurity was particularly acute in Departments such as Antioquia, Bolívar, Caquetá, Cauca, Chocó, La Guajira, Nariño, Putumayo and Valle del Cauca, owing to conflicts between armed groups and criminal organizations, and to a limited State presence. The violence is disrupting the lives of entire communities and further constraining the ability of those authorities present to fulfil their responsibilities. Illegal armed actors enforced a complete stop of daily activities for communities in five municipalities in Chocó Department, four in Caquetá Department and three in Putumayo Department, lasting between 4 and 27 days. According to the Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, those events disrupted the lives of some 61,000 people, who faced hindered access to essential goods and services."

Illicit crops and drug issues

When guerrillas or criminal groups take possession of a town or community for drug trafficking or plantation use, one of the first steps they take is to exert their authority over the local population through violence. Additionally, these groups seek to recruit young men, women and even children. Boys, girls and adolescents who live in the poorest and most marginalized communities in Colombia are being exploited to fuel the criminal expansion of the country's armed actors (El País, 25 May 2023). Guerrillas and other criminal groups controlling territory constantly try to silence those who represent an obstacle to their illegal activities. Community leaders, including church leaders, thus become victims

of violence. For instance, in August 2023, a group of 13 Christians were [attacked](#) by ELN with rifles and explosives when they gathered in a rural area to pray and fast. The illegal group mistook the brothers' tents for a camp belonging to a hostile group and proceeded to attack (Cric, 3 August 2023). The risk is greater for leaders involved in promoting human rights, denouncing corruption and participating in politics or in activities that seek to influence the population (especially young people). Assassinations and threats transmit a clear message to the local population to [remain silent](#) (Amnesty International, 9 November 2023).

Households participating in the 'National Comprehensive Program for the Substitution of Illicit Crops' continued to be subjected to threats and killings by criminal groups. This is especially worrying considering that in 2022, an increase of [13%](#) has been reported in the area planted with coca in the country, going from 204,000 hectares in 2021 to 230,000 hectares in 2022. The largest increase was recorded in Putumayo in its status as a department, in terms of municipalities, Tibú (Norte de Santander) occupies first place with nearly 22,000 hectares, relative stability compared to 2021. Tumaco (Nariño) y Puerto Asís (Putumayo) le siguen a Tibú en área de coca. Together they increased their area with coca by more than 65% (UNODC, 11 September 2023). Although the national government has allocated funds for developing municipalities prioritized for the implementation of the peace agreement, areas where most coca crops are grown have so far experienced no improvement in security conditions, road infrastructure or access to markets. Additionally, the economic vulnerability of these areas has risen since the COVID-19 crisis.

Progress in peace negotiations

To boost security, the new government under President Gustavo Petro proposed a plan for "Total Peace" ([CNN, 15 November 2022](#)), a proposal to include both guerrillas and drug traffickers in negotiations. It resumed peace talks with the National Liberation Army (ELN), with the president of Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro, acting as guarantor. Due to the presence of the ELN in Venezuela, Maduro's participation is considered by observers to be a clever plan, since there would be no possibility of making progress in talks without the cooperation of the Venezuelan government ([El Espectador, 30 September 2022](#)). Cuba formally hosted the peace negotiations in May 2023 after the two previous cycles held in Venezuela (November 2022) and Mexico (March 2023) ([CNN, 8 March 2023](#)). Despite the fact that the dialogue table has suffered several episodes of crisis, including the suspension of the "ceasefire" with the Central General Staff (i.e., the FARC dissidents who did not participate in the 2016 Peace Agreement) ([Público, 23 May 2023](#)) and with the Clan del Golfo ([El País, 19 March 2023](#)). At the close of the third cycle of negotiations in Cuba, the delegations announced a six-month ceasefire, effective from 3 August 2023, in addition to an agreement on the participation of civil society in the process ([El País, 12 June 2023](#)). The fourth cycle of negotiations took place in August 2023, in the city of Caracas, Venezuela. One of the most notable achievements was the creation of humanitarian zones in areas identified as critical, where "humanitarian actions and dynamics" will be carried out. In these areas, progress will be made in the implementation of projects that will reflect the agreements reached to date at the negotiation table. These initiatives will not only involve government and guerrilla actors but will also open to the active participation of civil society, local communities and the business sector ([PARES, 6 September 2023](#)).

In February 2024, at the close of the sixth cycle of negotiations, it was agreed to [extend the ceasefire](#) for another 180 days, including the cessation of kidnappings or "detention for economic purposes" (El

País, 22 May 2024). However, in May 2024, the ELN announced that it would [resume kidnappings](#) (Voz de América, 7 May 2024). The government, multilateral organizations and other sectors (as well as church leaders), [rejected](#) the ELN’s announcement (CEC, 7 May 2024). This has put the continuation of the negotiations at risk.

On the other hand, the government and the Second Marquetalia, a faction of the former FARC guerrilla that abandoned the peace agreement and returned to the armed struggle, agreed to set up [negotiations for peace](#) in Caracas in June 2024. Cuba, Norway and Venezuela will act as guarantors, while a delegate of the special representative of the Secretary General of the United Nations and the Episcopal Conference of Colombia will be permanent observers (La Hora, 5 June 2024).

Church leaders assist peace efforts but face intimidation

Some church leaders head groups seeking to assist in peace efforts. Before the May 2024 announcement by the ELN, two members of the World Council of Churches (WCC) [accompanied](#) the bilateral ceasefire process between the government and various armed groups (El Espectador, 6 January 2023). The Roman Catholic Church, in particular, has sought to promote dialogue and has been present as a witness in the peace talks through Bishop Héctor Fabio Henao, who heads the delegation of the Episcopal Conference of Colombia for relations between Church and State. In addition, in the context of the peace talks, it has initiated a series of training sessions for priests, other Christians and citizens in general, called “[learning peace](#)”. These sessions present guidelines for understanding the role of the Church in the Monitoring Mechanism and Verification of the bilateral ceasefire (AND Celam, 4 March 2024). Due to the crisis in the dialogue process, President Petro has approached Pope Francis with the request to hold a round of negotiations with the ELN in the [Vatican](#) (EFE, 19 January 2024).

The increased levels of control gained by criminal groups during the COVID-19 crisis made it easier for criminal groups to exert power over entire territories and [threaten](#) church leaders (FoRB in Full, 11 November 2023). The latter are exposed to [death threats](#) and [extortion](#) whenever they advocate for peace and oppose criminal activity (Aciprensa, 8 February 2022; Infobae, 15 August 2023). This type of intimidating action often also extends to the relatives of religious leaders (Caracol, 4 September 2022). Similarly, church and social leaders who have spoken out publicly about the apparent collusion between authorities and criminal groups have been put under [pressure](#) by some members of the army (Prensa Celam, 15 February 2022). Other measures for silencing and applying pressure are [forced displacements](#) (FoRB, 1 December 2020), [killings](#) (El Tiempo, 16 May 2023) and/or [attacks](#) (Aciprensa, 3 May 2024). As acts of intimidation, churches have also been [burgled](#) and vandalized (Infobae, 28 November 2023). Sometimes guerrillas paint graffiti on church buildings as another means of [intimidation](#) (Infobae, 22 December 2022). Churches have often had to change the [times](#) of their church services, since local gangs often set curfews, dictating when people are allowed to be out on the streets (Catholic News Agency, 2 September 2022).

Gender perspective

Forced recruitment of young adolescents (primarily boys) poses an ongoing threat to Christian communities ([BBC News, 5 August 2022](#)). Reports indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic was exploited by criminal groups to upscale recruitment and gang activity ([The New Humanitarian, 10 September 2020](#)). Refusing to join gangs is not an option, causing many to flee for fear of reprisals (Open Doors International, [Gender Specific Religious Persecution report](#), 1 March 2021). As highlighted in a 2018

World Watch Monitor report, Christian women and girls are at times double vulnerable to sexual assaults by armed groups based on their religion and gender ([World Watch Monitor, 7 March 2018](#)). There are also an increasing number of reports of the use of sexual violence by rival groups against men and boys in conflict zones as a means of torture, intimidation and coercion to gain territorial control ([Reliefweb, 28 June 2022](#)).

Christian origins

Christianity came to Colombia through Spain's conquest and colonization from 1492 onwards. The Roman Catholic Church was able to establish itself as the sole Christian denomination. After Colombia gained independence from Spain in 1810, the Vatican in Rome established formal relations with the new state in 1835. The Roman Catholic Church took on an increasing political presence in the country which caused much friction with the political leaders of the time. As a result, Catholics were persecuted and religious communities such as the Jesuits were expelled from the country in 1851 and 1861.

In 1877 the radical government's attempts to establish a 'neutral' educational system degenerated into civil war with the active participation of several bishops and clerics. In 1886 the relationship between Church and State was settled in a new constitution which recognized the Catholic Church as the basis for national unity.

The loss of Catholic hegemony began with the arrival of the Presbyterian Church in the middle of the 19th century. At the beginning of the 20th century Baptists and other Protestants arrived. In the 1960s the religious landscape began to change visibly due to social, economic and cultural changes caused by modernization, urbanization and literacy. Pentecostalism came from the USA and soon became very popular. This new branch of Christianity was formally recognized in 1991 in the new Constitution of Colombia.

Church spectrum today

Colombia: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	11,500	0.0
Catholic	44,121,000	88.8
Protestant	2,159,000	4.3
Independent	2,960,000	6.0
Unaffiliated	560,000	1.1
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-119,000	-0.2
Total	49,692,500	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	1,330,000	2.7
Pentecostal-Charismatic	16,619,000	33.4

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

The main Christian denomination in Colombia is the Roman Catholic Church, representing 88.8% of all Christians according to WCD 2024 estimates - a decrease of 0.2% in comparison to 2023. Protestant church groups continue to show growth and become more visible and influential, particularly where so-called 'Mega-churches' with congregations of thousands have become established in many major cities.

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Colombia>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- [Latin-America-Organized-corruption-and-crime-2018.pdf \(opendoorsanalytical.org\)](https://opendoorsanalytical.org/Latin-America-Organized-corruption-and-crime-2018.pdf)

External Links

- Recent history: presidential election - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/20/former-guerrilla-gustavo-petro-wins-colombian-election-to-become-first-leftist-president>
- Recent history: demonstrations - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/04/colombia-protest-duque-bogota>
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