

WORLD WATCH LIST 2025

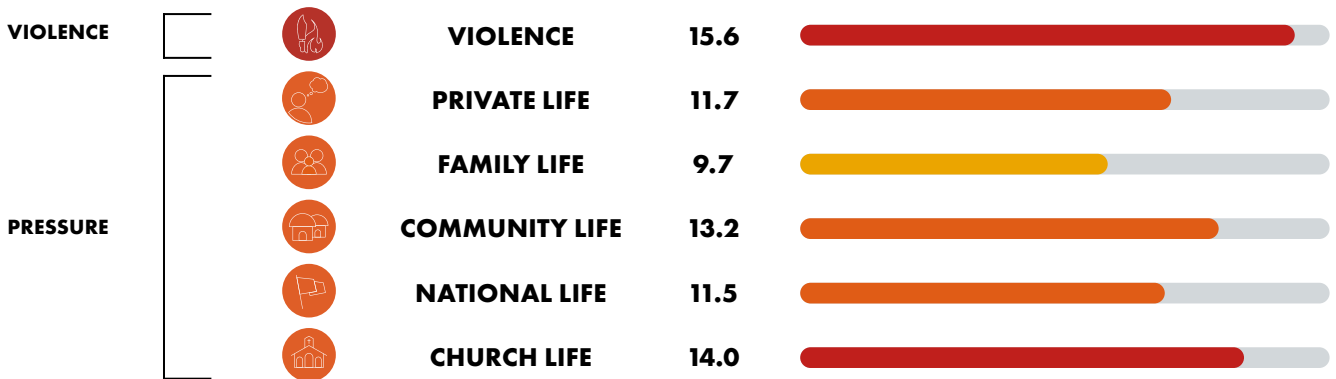
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
20

BURKINA FASO



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Key findings

In recent years, the impact of Islamist militants in the country has been expanding, making their influence felt even in cities that had previously been beyond their reach. This has particularly been the case for the “Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims” (JNIM). Christians have been targeted and killed, and churches have been destroyed. Similar attacks in Niger, Mali and the greater Sahel region are making the situation in Burkina Faso very serious. Christians have been targeted in villages, churches and workplaces. Hundreds of churches have been closed due to jihadist activities. Family and community members reject converts and try to force them to renounce their Christian faith, making them afraid to express their faith in public because of such threats. The scope for religious freedom for Christians is contracting as jihadist ideologies gain traction and expand within the broader community. Christians from a Muslim background are the most persecuted Christian group in the country.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Ibrahim Traore

POPULATION

23,840,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

6,169,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Presidential System (military rule)



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	6,169,000	25.9
Muslims	13,362,000	56.0
Ethno-religionists	4,158,000	17.4
Agnostics	145,000	0.6

Source²

Burkina Faso has long been a country in turmoil, struggling with years of political unrest and military dictatorship. The ousting of President Blaise Compaoré in 2014 after 27 years marked another turbulent chapter in its history. Burkina Faso remains one of the world's least developed countries, where nearly 80% of the population engage in subsistence farming.

The region is increasingly becoming a battleground for geopolitical influence among Western powers and Russia, exacerbating already existing problems. The human rights situation in the country dramatically worsened in 2022 and continued its downward trajectory into 2024, as documented by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the International Crisis Group. Burkina Faso has become a victim of the expansion of jihadist activity, organized crime, and corruption, adding another layer of complexity to its dire situation.

The nation has witnessed a surge in brutal attacks by Islamist armed groups, resulting in numerous civilian and military casualties. These militant groups include but are not limited to *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM), Islamic State West Africa (ISWA), Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Mourabitoun, Ansar Dine, and Boko Haram. This rise in jihadist activity has caused internal displacement to soar, affecting nearly 2 million people, or approximately 10% of the nation's population.

Political instability has further deteriorated the landscape, with two military coups destabilizing governance structures. The first coup in January 2022 ousted President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, leading to the establishment of a Transition Government. However, a second coup in October 2022, led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré, replaced this government with his own military regime. Burkina Faso, along with Mali and Niger, announced its withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in early 2024. This decision was driven by the military juntas governing these countries, who argued that ECOWAS had strayed from its original ideals and had imposed harsh sanctions on their nations. They accused the bloc of being influenced by foreign powers and failing to support them in their fight against terrorism and insecurity. The countries also withdrew from the G5 Sahel alliance and instead formed a defense pact called the "Alliance of Sahel States" to ensure mutual protection against both internal and external threats.

¹ Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

² Data source: Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

In the midst of these complexities, Christian minorities in Burkina Faso face heightened persecution. They are frequently targeted by militant groups because of their religious identity, leading to loss of life, destruction of churches, and widespread displacement. Christian women and girls are particularly vulnerable to abduction, rape, and forced marriages, while boys are at risk of being conscripted into militant forces. The targeting of Christians serves not only as a human rights violation but also undermines the structural integrity of the Christian church in the country, leaving it weakened and marginalized.

How the situation varies by region

The northern and eastern parts of the country are the main areas where Christians experience the most pressure and violence, particularly outside the main cities. In the western part of the country, ethno-religious groups also put pressure on Christians.

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

Expatriate Christians are not involuntarily isolated and are therefore not treated as a separate WWL category.

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

The Roman Catholic Church is the most dominant Christian denomination. Most of the country's political leaders have been Catholics. Catholics face fewer violations compared to other Christian groups, but Catholic churches have been targeted in the past.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

This category includes Christians of Muslim or traditional African religious backgrounds. Converts from a Muslim background experience the most serious persecution from their families and communities.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations are concentrated mostly in the major cities. They can be targeted more often than historical Christian groups by Islamic militants because they engage in more proselytism.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

ISLAMIC OPPRESSION BLENDED WITH CLAN OPPRESSION

Burkina Faso has experienced several Islamic radical attacks in recent years, especially in the northern region and occasionally in the capital. *Ansar ul Islam*, formed in 2016, has tried to impose its laws in the northern part of the country through violent and non-violent means. *Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslim* ("Group supporting Islam and Muslims") focuses more on combating the French presence and countries allied to France. Its preachers influence the youth into blaming their misfortune on the French and on the corruption of morals of the West. There have been attacks on churches and Christians by Islamic militants and some churches have stepped up security, fearing further attacks may be planned. The government is blamed for brutality against civilians as they try to combat terrorists that often infiltrate civilian communities.

ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

In many countries in the Sahel region, organized corruption enables jihadists to recruit, buy weapons, and operate with impunity. A country respondent indicated: "There is a high level of corruption in governance. Crimes such as robbery and kidnapping are being committed in various regions of the country. The government is doing little or nothing to contain such crime, even in the capital city, Ouagadougou."



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Women and girls face distinctive forms of persecution, including rape, forced marriage, banishment, and abduction. Islamic militant groups are influential in the regions, particularly the east, and central government is weak. In this context, there is a high potential for abduction by militants. Females may be forced into marriage and put under intense pressure to convert to Islam. Sexual violence is a common tool for attacking Christian communities. In particular, daughters of Christian leaders can be targeted for rape. Converts from an Islamic or traditional religious background face further pressure, including forced marriage, death threats and house arrest.

Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Islamic militant groups operating in the Sahel region often forcefully recruit their members from countries such as Burkina Faso. Christian men and boys are targeted for forceful recruitment and physical attacks. The abduction and killing of Christian men causes fear and trauma in Christian communities, alongside economic fragility for families. Many men and boys often flee to safer areas in the country or other countries. Church leaders, mostly male, have been targeted by militants through abductions and executions.

Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Forced to flee town/country
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2025	20	76
2024	20	75
2023	23	71
2022	32	68
2021	32	67

In WWL 2025, the overall score rose by one point (after rounding decimals), following the rising trend over the past five years. Average pressure remains very high and violence extremely high. The expanding reach of jihadist groups has forced the closure of numerous churches and Christian schools, placing immense strain on Christian communities. Targeted attacks and fatalities among Christians have fostered a climate of fear, deterring many from attending church services or sending their children to Christian educational institutions. Additionally, jihadist factions have seized control in various regions, often replacing government functions and assuming the role of essential service providers. Ethnic conflicts, often intertwined with religious divisions, have deepened, placing added pressure on Christian converts and other Christian groups.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- October 2023, Débé village attacked:** In October 2023, terrorists forced the entire Christian population of Débé to leave their village. They shot dead two scouts inside the village church who resisted their orders. This attack marked a significant escalation in violence against Christians in the region.
- February 2024, church attacked in Essakane:** On 25 February 2024, gunmen attacked a Catholic Church in Essakane during a Sunday church service, killing 15 people. This attack targeted worshipers and was carried out by suspected radical Islamic militants.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Christians internally displaced
2025	201	100*	100*	10,000*
2024	31	100*	100*	7000

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the country's corresponding WWL Persecution Dynamics. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*.*

PRIVATE LIFE

Christians, particularly converts from Islam, face hostile reactions if they discuss their faith with others. This is a new phenomenon. In some remote areas, Christians must ensure they do not have Christian materials at home because militants can come to their homes and search for such evidence. Conversion, though not forbidden by law, is opposed by Muslims in certain areas and can lead to a convert being treated as an outcast.

FAMILY LIFE

In some schools where leaders or founders are predominantly Muslim, Christian students face pressure to receive Islamic teaching. This has been reported in cities like Bobo Dioulasso and even in the capital, Ouagadougou. It has been reported that Islamic militants have killed teachers who did not teach Islam. Converts lose inheritance rights. All Christian groups must make sure they do not celebrate Christian weddings or festivals in areas prone to attacks by jihadists.

COMMUNITY LIFE

Christians are targeted, especially in the northern region, which shares a border with Mali. Soum Province seems to be the current epicenter of Islamic militant activity. Here, Christians have been kidnapped and security forces attacked. The Ansar al-Islam movement has launched attacks and intimidated school teachers into replacing

French with Arabic as the language of instruction in schools. Schools that do not teach Islam have been burned down. Many Christians have fled their homes. Forced marriages have also been used as a weapon to force female converts to return to Islam. Where Christians are a minority, they are often hindered from accessing community resources.

NATIONAL LIFE

Churches experience difficulties obtaining permits from the administrative authorities for things like purchasing land. In northern, eastern and western parts of the country where Islam is strongly represented, and radical ideology has a foothold, Christians face increasing animosity.

CHURCH LIFE

Despite the fact the country is officially secular and Christians make up over 20% of the population, many churches live in fear of attack and are closely monitored by militant groups and community leaders in the northern, eastern, and western parts of the country. In many predominantly Muslim communities, church work among the youth is very restricted. The sale or distribution of Bibles and Christian materials is not impeded by the state, but these activities cannot be carried out by converts from traditional African religions or Islam without risking serious trouble.

International obligations & rights violated

Burkina Faso has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
3. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
4. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Burkina Faso is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christians are killed for their faith (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Christian converts from a Muslim background are ostracized, faced with opposition by their families, and threatened with loss of inheritance (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians and their activities are monitored by militant groups (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christian female converts run the risk of being forcibly married to Muslim men (ICCPR Art. 23; CEDAW Art. 16)
- Perpetrators of violence against Christians are sometimes left unpunished (ICCPR Art. 2)

Situation of other religious minorities

Islamic radicalization is growing in Burkina Faso. The peripheries of the country are under the influence of Islamic militants and mosques and madrassas increasingly teach radical versions of Sunni Islam, thus causing even Sufi Muslims to be under threat. In these areas, there is no place for religious minorities. It was even reported that teachers in schools were told that they should hold Quran classes or face repercussions. Anti-Islamic sentiment is rising in Burkina Faso among other vigilante armed groups.



Open Doors in Burkina Faso

Open Doors started working in Burkina Faso in 2019 as jihadist violence increased radically. Our vision is to see the Church increasingly becoming able to respond biblically to persecution by spiritually empowering her members and caring for the most affected through training (persecution awareness), relief efforts, and spiritual and trauma care.



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ABOUT THIS BRIEF

- The content of this document is based on the more detailed WWL Persecution Dynamics per country published annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2025 Open Doors International.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the WWL Persecution Dynamics per country, accompanying Background Information per country and the latest update of WWL Methodology. These are also available at the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).
- The WWL 2025 reporting period was 01 October 2023 – 30 September 2024.

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