

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

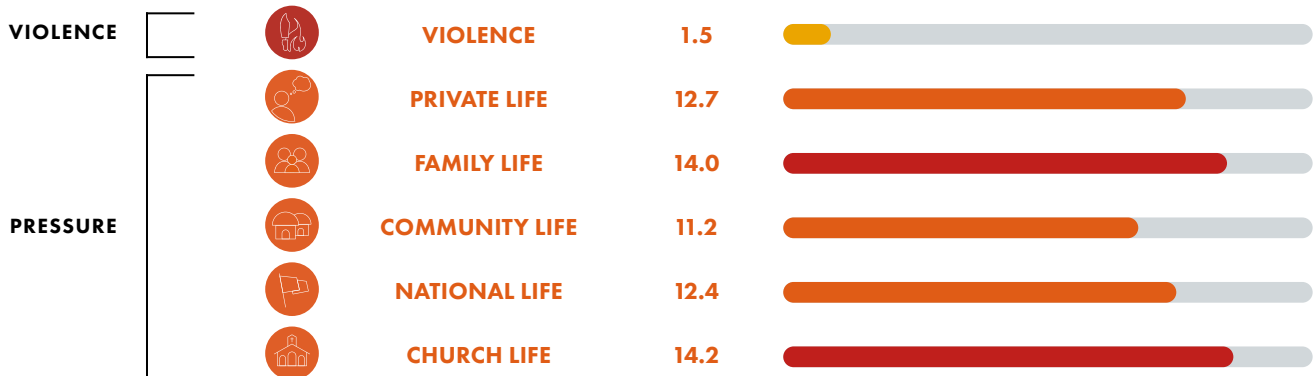
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
42

Comoros



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

Sunni Islam is the established state religion in Comoros. Proselytization by any other religion is illegal, and converts to Christianity can be prosecuted. Converts from Islam face the most severe difficulties and are under pressure not to exercise their faith. In some parts of the country, radical groups threaten Christians with violence.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Azali Assoumani

POPULATION

907,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

4,600¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



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Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	4,600	0.5
Muslims	892,000	98.3
Ethno-religionists	8,600	0.9

After years of political instability following independence from France around 1975, the Comoros archipelago underwent a democratic transition in 2006. Islam is the established state religion through the Constitution, and the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam set the norms for life in Comoros. The Constitution declares [equality of rights](#) for all individuals regardless of religion or belief, but proselytizing is prohibited by law and punishable with fine and imprisonment, except for Sunni Islam. The law provides for the deportation of foreigners who proselytize.

Christian population in Comoros is concentrated in major cities. There are only a handful of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) reported existing, with freedom of speech and the ability to carry out investigations and publish findings on human rights cases. Christian NGOs, however, face discrimination through governmental restrictions in advertising and operations. The government has prohibited Christian NGOs from distributing religious literature, clothing, and symbols.

Comorians hold to the matriarchal family system, uncommon in other parts of Africa. Women are tasked with the role of initiating marriage and building a home for the family. Men still hold the mantle of religious leadership, but it is women who hold strong influence within the family. Women do suffer from inferior legal status, as well as the cultural practices of polygamy, unilateral divorce, and child marriages. The country additionally faces issues of high population density and poverty.

Comoros benefits from having low crime and no imminent threat of Islamist militancy. However, some radical Islamists known as *djaulas* harass Christians, particularly converts from Islam.

How the situation varies by region

All Christian communities in Comoros face persecution, but persecution against converts from Islam is the most severe.

¹ Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Christians in this group (e.g., the church of the Malagasy people from Madagascar) are restricted from integrating converts from Islam and preaching in public outside their church buildings, or else they face deportation. The pressure comes from radical Islamists, non-Christian religious leaders, and political leaders. Improvement may come with positive changes recently sought by the government, both domestically and for the purpose of building relationships with Western nations.

Historical Christian communities

These do not exist separate from the expatriate category above.

Converts to Christianity

Christians with a Muslim background face persecution at home from family and community members: shunned and completely cut off from their families and friends. Converts also experience persecution from government officials, political actors, non-Christian religious leaders, *djaulas*, and other radical Islamist groups.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Christians in this category, including Baptists and Evangelicals, face legal fines and imprisonment for their evangelizing works.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression:

Islamic oppression in Comoros is not new, but has worsened with the adoption of a constitutional change that has since declared Sunni-Islam as the state religion. Parallel to the new constitution, more Comorians are adopting a radical view of Islamism, especially on the islands of Anjouan and Moheli. In mosques and madrassas, some Muslim religious leaders regularly teach anti-Christian sentiments. *Djaulas*, an ultra-conservative group of radical scholars, many of whom are trained in Pakistan, is pushing the country to a more extreme view of Sharia law. The *djaulas* in particular harass, bully, and ostracize Christians, particularly converts from Islam. As in many other Muslim-majority countries, it is unthinkable to leave Islam for the majority of Comorians. Those who do are discriminated and harassed by family and community members. Christians are denied worshiping space, religious discussions in public, and public preaching.

Dictatorial paranoia:

The government has consolidated power by promoting Sunni-Islam at the expense of all other religions, placing serious restrictions on the activities of Christians and Christian NGOs. The government has openly stated that freedom of religion is not applicable to converts and Christians.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Despite its matrilineal heritage, worship and social life in Comoros are dominated by Sunni principles, which place Christian women and girls at a societal disadvantage. Cases of domestic violence and the persecution of Christian women, particularly female converts from Islam, remain underreported due to poor legal and socio-economic protections. In addition to criminal prosecution, female converts may experience heightened abuse and discrimination. Comorian women and girls are also at high risk of trans-national trafficking, owing to the country's weak border control.

- Denied access to social community / networks
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

MEN

While there are many similarities between the experiences of men and women of Christian heritage, persecution targeting converts particularly differs according to gender. Male converts from Islam are vulnerable to societal pressures and are at increased risk of being forced out of their homes or to divorce due to prevalent matrilineal norms. The absence of legal provisions against the discrimination of converts, alongside a significant population of extremist sympathizers, exacerbates the use of discriminatory workplace policies and the threat of physical violence,

forcing many converts to flee the country.

- Denied access to social community / networks
- Denied food or water
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Forced divorce
- Forced out of home / expulsion
- Forced to flee town / country
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	42	66
2022	53	63
2021	50	62
2020	54	57
2019	51	56

Comoros re-joined the WWL 2023 top 50 with a score of 66 points, three points higher than WWL 2022 when the country dropped out of the top 50. The increase of three points is due to an increase in the levels of pressure exerted by the government and the community. That pressure continued and increased during the WWL 2023 and WWL 2022 reporting period point. The government has said in public that there is no freedom of religion for Comorians, but only for non-Comorians residing in the country. Any Christian who is seen preaching will be fined and face a prison sentence that could last for one year. The score for violence also increased. (It should be recalled that Comoros was in the WWL top 10 countries in the early 1990s until 1998, and in the top 20 for several years after that).



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Converts from Islam to Christianity are shunned by family members.
- Women converts are often forced to marry a Muslim against their will.
- Christians face being bullied and harassed on the street and at work.
- Christians face fines or imprisonment for engaging in religious discussions in public or for preaching in public outside churches.

WWL Year	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians detained	Christians internally displaced
2023	10*	2	10*
2022	18	2	0

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. 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.*

Private life

Although conversion is not officially outlawed, any Comorian nationals found to have converted from Islam are met with intense pressure from family and friends: ostracization, loss of livelihood, and divorce. Converts would not be able to wear Christian symbols like the cross without risk of violence. The government has openly encouraged violence against non-Sunni citizens. The law prohibits the public exercise of non-Sunni religious rituals on the basis of affronting society’s cohesion and endangering national unity. Public preaching of Christianity is a crime—and any mention or expression of the Christian faith can be interpreted as a public preaching. Proselytizing, an illegal activity in Comoros, is punishable by law of a fine of 50,000 to 500,000 Comorian francs (\$110–\$1,100) and of imprisonment of up to one year.

Family life

The government has expressly stated that freedom of religion is not for the Comorian people. Christian ceremonies like weddings may be construed as preaching, an illegal activity that may attract a mob attack, so Christians keep a very low profile. For purposes of the government, all Comorians are Sunni Muslims and every child (even of converts) is presumed to be Muslim and registered as such. There is no room for parents to refuse to have their children sent to Islamic schools; it is mandatory.

Community life

Open practice of Christianity is prohibited and society keeps a watchful eye on any non-Muslim groups,

with converts from Islam being the most intensely marginalized, shunned, harassed, and threatened. They are seen as outcasts, unworthy of respect and protection. It is not uncommon for converts to be forced to recant their faith, so Christian converts hide their conversion.

National life

Comoros is sliding backwards in freedom of religion. True to its Constitution, the government publicly exhorts citizens to reject all forms of religion except Sunni Islam. Families and communities who shun converts, be they Christians or Shia Muslims, get their cues from the national government. Christians struggle to find places for worship, as the government allows them to pray at only two designated places in the entire country: the expatriate church in Moroni and Mutsamudu.

Church life

Church activities remain under surveillance to ensure no Comorian national joined them or converted. Christian activities outside the walls of church buildings are seen as illegal proselytization. Communities of converts and non-traditional Christian communities do exist, but they cannot operate freely or officially. The existing expatriate churches are not allowed to open new branches, as this would be proof of their increasing numbers. No new church has been built or registered in the country for decades.

International obligations & rights violated

Comoros has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

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

**Comoros has signed but not ratified the ICCPR and ICESCR.*

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

- Christian parents cannot raise their children according to their religious values (CRC Art. 14)
- Christian female converts run the risk of being forcibly married to Muslim men or forcibly divorced (CEDAW Art. 16)



Situation of other religious minorities

Shia and Ahmadi Muslims are unable to worship publicly and have had their religious gatherings in private homes monitored by government authorities.



Open Doors in Comoros

Open Doors has supported Christians on East African islands since the 1990s and our vision is to see a church mature in faith, accomplishing the Great Commission. We continue our support to the persecuted Church through:

- Discipleship
- Economic empowerment

About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced 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: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
