

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

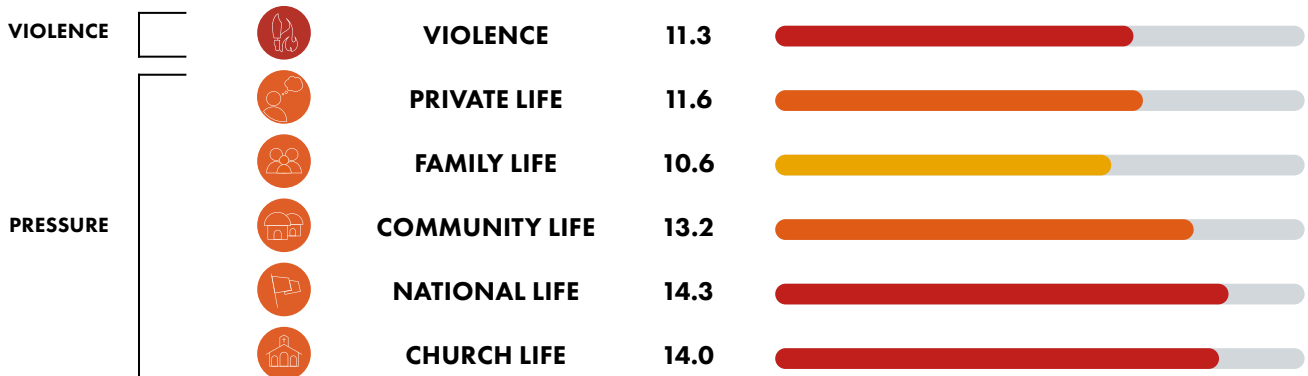
LAOS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
21



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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

Christians in Laos were shocked by the highly exceptional killing of a pastor in October 2022 and two other killings since. While they are no strangers to being treated violently, a killing is a very rare event in recent years. The usual levels of pressure faced are as follows: Communist authorities heavily monitor all religious activities, including those of registered churches. As all gatherings have to be notified to the administration, house churches have to operate clandestinely as they are considered 'illegal gatherings'. Even an estimated 75% of all government-approved Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) congregations throughout the country do not have permanent church structures and consequently conduct worship services in homes. Converts to Christianity bear the most severe rights violations. They are considered guilty of putting themselves outside the (Buddhist-animist) community and consequently face pressure and violence from their families (which, in a Laotian household, usually consist of three generations under one roof) and from the local authorities. Both will often stir up the local community or seek assistance from local religious leaders. This can lead to converts being expelled from their home village.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Thongloun Sisoulith

POPULATION

7,581,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

212,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Buddhism

GOVERNMENT

Communist State



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	212,000	2.8
Buddhists	4,099,000	54.1
Ethno-religionists	3,110,000	41.0
Agnostics	63,300	0.8

Source²

Laos was a French colony until 1953. Communist forces overthrew the constitutional monarchy in 1975. Since then, it has been a unitary Marxist-Leninist republic that has been governed by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. The election of a [new Prime Minister](#), Sonexay Siphandone, in December 2022 will most likely bring only limited change, if any (RFA, 4 January 2023). Despite economic reforms in the 1980s, the country remains extremely poor and heavily dependent on foreign aid, which has steadily and increasingly been provided by China, thereby making Laos all the more dependent on China for infrastructural needs and in terms of debt too.

International observers have routinely characterized the country's human rights record as exceptionally poor, due to restrictions on civil liberties and persecution of minorities. The authorities put a high emphasis on controlling and even indoctrinating the population via the media (which cannot be called 'free' at all) and [clamping down](#) on citizens voicing complaints or concerns on social media (UCA News, 1 March 2021). At

the same time, in practice, village laws, frequently based on traditions and beliefs, trump all national laws.

The difficulties Christians face come mainly from the local authorities and village leaders who are more concerned with guarding and preserving ethnic practices and keeping up the Communist management style and bureaucracy, as well as keeping the peace in the villages. The killing of a pastor in October 2022 and other subsequent killings came as a shock to the small Christian community and was a vivid reminder that a growing Christian church does not sit well with local authorities, especially in rural areas. The country is still in the tight grip of the Communist Party; therefore, religion is something the authorities view as hostile and needs to be controlled. While Buddhism is accepted as being part of the country's heritage, to a certain extent, Christianity is seen as being foreign, especially in the villages, linked with Western values and an enemy of Communism.

According to the World Christian Database 2023 estimates, 54.1% of the population are Buddhist, mainly following the Theravada teachings. 41% adhere to ethnic religions (Chinese folk not included) related to their ethnic or tribal ancestry. Several folk traditions have been incorporated into Buddhism, so the numbers given above should be understood as overlapping. 2.8% of the population is Christian. Major Christian denominations are the Roman Catholic Church, Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) and the Seventh Day Adventists. Many other churches are active but few in number, for instance, Evangelical, Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist, Lutheran and Assemblies of God.

¹ Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

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How the situation varies by region

Provinces like Luang Namtha, Phongsaly and Houphan in the north, Khammouane and Savannakhet in the central part and Salavan in the south have traditionally been difficult places for Christians. Khammouane even witnessed the killing of a pastor, the first killing of a Christian for his faith for a long time. The local authorities and communities in these areas still seem very determined to silence Christian witness.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriate Christians generally are not allowed to mix with local churches. However, they were permitted to join two Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) churches in the capital, Vientiane. Expatriate Christians include communities of diplomatic staff and face restrictions, for example, through the police monitoring system.

Historical Christian communities

Historical Christian communities include the Roman Catholic Church, LEC and Seventh Day Adventists. Although officially recognized by the authorities, they are heavily monitored. In the case of the LEC, there is a tacit understanding that the authorities in some areas play a part in selecting leaders and approving Christian materials for print.

Converts to Christianity

Converts to Christianity from Buddhism or Animism face the highest levels of pressure and violence from local authorities, families and the wider community. Conversion is seen as a potential threat to government authority and a betrayal of family and community unity. In response, police often act quickly and with a heavy hand to repress Christian groups reported to be spreading their faith.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Non-traditional Christian communities include Evangelicals, Pentecostals and Lutherans. As the government does not allow 'illegal' gatherings, these groups need to register under one of the three government-recognized churches mentioned under Historical Christian communities. Unregistered churches must meet in secret.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Communist oppression blended with dictatorial paranoia

Laos is one of five remaining Marxist-Leninist countries in the world. However, faithful adherence to Communist ideology is pronounced only in a few provinces and villages. These areas faithful to Communist ideology are strictly opposed to any influence deemed foreign or Western, including Christianity. Local authorities will often take advantage of society's hostile attitudes towards Christians to justify actions against them.

Clan oppression

Animism and other tribal practices are observed throughout the country, especially in rural areas. Abandoning tribal practices for Christianity is seen as a betrayal of family and wider community identity. Village leaders and family members often force Christians to renounce their faith or expel them from their communities so as not to anger the community's traditional spirits.

Religious nationalism

Theravada Buddhism is practiced by most of the population and is the basis for the Lao culture. As one country expert said: "Buddhism is the glue that binds the numerous ethnic groups and inaccessible villages scattered through the mountainous countryside." At the same time, he added: "Animistic practices and fear of the spirits are also part of the Buddhist culture in the country".



How are men and women differently affected?

Women

Violence against women is culturally widely accepted. Girls may experience discrimination and harassment at school, and female Christian leaders may be arrested. Women can suffer economically and emotionally from the persecution of men, especially when their husbands are arrested and detained. Converts face the greatest pressures, which include mockery, isolation, and in some cases, divorce and the resulting economic pressures. Within the family setting, they might also be beaten or disowned.

Female typical pressure points:

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Trafficking
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

Men

Church leadership tends to be dominated by men, a role that has become frequently targeted. Pastors are vulnerable to attacks on churches and to incarceration by the authorities. Considerable amounts of money must be paid for their release, and leaders report harsh and degrading treatment whilst detained. Christians face workplace persecution and discrimination, exclusion from government and military roles, and job loss.

Male typical pressure points:

- Economic harassment via business/job/ work access
- Economic harassment via fines
- Imprisonment by government
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological



WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	21	75
2023	31	68
2022	26	69
2021	22	71
2020	20	72

The score for Laos increased by an unprecedented 6.6 points from WWL 2023 to WWL 2024, almost exclusively owing to an increase in the reporting of violent incidents, causing the violence score to more than double. For the Christian community of Laos, the most pronounced and shocking violence has been the cases of killings, the most prominent among them being the killing of a pastor in October 2022. Apart from that, incidents of churches being closed and Christians attacked and detained were reported. Meanwhile, the level of pressure exerted on Christians by (mainly local) state authorities and very strong pressure on converts from family, friends, neighbors and the local authorities has not ceased. In areas where the church is growing, especially where new churches are established in rural areas, pressure and even violence are almost certain to follow, again, mainly from actors on the local level. By putting very high pressure on Christians, Laos follows the example set by other countries still ruled by Communist parties - especially its big neighbor, China.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

In the WWL 2024 reporting period, four further killings have been reported. For security reasons, no details can be provided.

- **23 October 2022:** Pastor Sy Seng Manee was killed while traveling on a ministry trip. His body was found in a forest near a road to Donkeo village, Khammouane province (Radio Free Asia - RFA, 15 November 2022). Pastor Sy had been arrested by the authorities back in 2018 when he held weekly worship meetings in his house.
- **3 January 2023 and 3 February 2023:** At least 15 Christians were arrested in Central and Southern Laos. For security reasons, no details can be provided.
- **29 January 2023:** In the south-central region of Laos, the houses of a group of Christians were damaged by angry villagers because the Christians refused to give up their faith.

WWL Year	Christians internally displaced	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained
2024	159	4	25	65
2023	35	0	4	18

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

Christian converts either from Buddhism or ethnic religions need to keep their faith secret. If discovered, village elders and their assistants threaten Christians with expulsion. Many Lao believe that they are protected by phi (spirits) and fear offending the spirits. Christians are given a deadline to recant and not doom the village. They are put under pressure, and if this does not work, Christians are violently expelled.

Family life

Buddhist teachings and animist practices and beliefs are considered part of Lao identity. Christians are under pressure to conform; children can be forced by school or the community to attend Buddhist temple services and practice associated rituals. Christians in devout Buddhist areas are discriminated against in many areas of their lives, such as being denied admission to education and jobs. Christians are hindered, or in some cases arrested, for holding Christian funerals. As one country expert explained: "Christians have to either pay an extra amount to be allowed to use the village cemetery or bury the dead in their own land or in a purchased land. Along with the payment, believers are also asked to kill a pig / buffalo in order to appease the spirits, thus, forcing the believers to carry out an animistic rite." Even rural churches registered under the LEC are unable to openly carry out baptisms in the country.

Community life

There is immense community pressure on Christians. In provinces like Luang Namtha, Phongsaly and Houphan in the north, Savannakhet in the central, Bolikhamxay and Khammouane provinces in the central part and Salavan and Attapeu provinces in the south, local authorities, especially village leaders, harass, monitor, arrest and evict Christians. Police require the church to provide personal information such as photos, phone numbers, and addresses of both clergy and laity to facilitate state monitoring. Christians discovered in the public service (including the military) are either dismissed or passed over for promotion. The pensions of Christians who have retired from government service can be cut. This reporting period saw a pronounced increase in reports of Christians from all over the rural areas of Laos renouncing their faith.

National life

Although the Lao Constitution stipulates freedom of religion, this right is not respected. Communist government officials apply pressure, but the majority of violations occur at the local level from rural village leaders. These local leaders are concerned primarily with preserving ethnic practices and maintaining the Communist bureaucracy to some extent. If Christians are employed in public service, they are routinely overlooked when promotions for senior positions take

place, even though they would have more experience and a better track record than other candidates.

Church life

Many church activities require approval from the government, as stipulated in [Decree 315](#). Both secret and uniformed police attend services, count the

number of people attending, and take notes on the sermons. The government is slightly more tolerant of religious practices in urban areas but has often acted severely in rural areas. In the reporting period, there have been reports about increased scrutiny by police against Bibles and other Christian material.

International obligations & rights violated

Laos has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under 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 \(CRC\)](#)

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

- Christian communities and their activities are closely monitored by the authorities (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christians face discrimination in employment because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Christian children are forced to receive Buddhist religious education and to participate in religious ceremonies and festivals that are not in line with their religious beliefs (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- The state imposes strict limitations on Christian meetings that go beyond the internationally recognized and permitted limitations (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 21)
- Christians are attacked and expelled from their community for sharing about their faith (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Christians are killed because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 6.1)
- Christians are imprisoned for their faith (ICCPR Art. 9)



Situation of other religious minorities

Buddhists outside of mainstream Buddhist teaching sometimes face problems when registering monks. Among the ethnic communities, the Hmong (often animists or Christians) in some areas have faced the greatest oppression from the government. Muslims, Hindus and adherents of Bahai also form tiny minorities in the country, which face pressure from Communist state authorities.

Open Doors in Laos

Open Doors works through local church partners to come alongside Lao believers when they suffer persecution for choosing to follow Christ. Physical attacks and expulsion from their families and communities are the common forms of oppression they encounter. Our interventions include presence, relief, practical aid and advocacy. Open Doors also works through local partners to strengthen persecuted believers in Laos through the following efforts:

- Provision of Christian materials
- Leadership training
- Discipleship programs
- Socio-economic development programs



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: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

Most of the photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
