

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

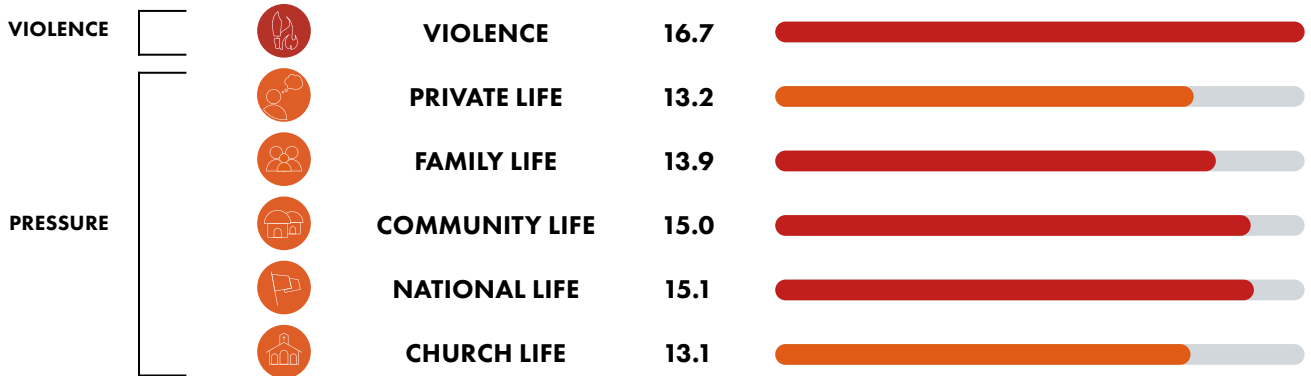
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**7**

## PAKISTAN



### 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

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan has been a Muslim state since its independence in 1947. Historical churches have relative freedom but are heavily monitored and have been targeted for bomb attacks (the last large attack happened in December 2017 in Quetta). Churches more active in outreach and youth work face severe rights violations. All Christians suffer from institutionalized discrimination; occupations seen as low and dirty are reserved for Christians by the authorities, as can be seen in job adverts. Many Christians are poor and can be victims of bonded labor. The country's notorious blasphemy laws target religious minorities (including Muslim minorities). Its high potential for violence was illustrated in the city of Jaranwala in August 2023, where at least 21 churches were burned or damaged and hundreds of Christians fled their settlements. Christians with a Muslim background suffer the brunt of religious freedom violations both from radical Islamic groups (who see them as apostates) and from their families, friends and neighbors who see conversion as a shameful act of betrayal.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

Interim Prime Minister  
Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar

### POPULATION

233,757,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

4,195,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Federal Parliamentary Republic



## Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	4,195,000	1.8
Muslims	225,899,000	96.6
Hindus	2,915,000	1.2
Ethno-religionists	235,000	0.1

Source<sup>2</sup>

Pakistan has suffered from unstable governments, with three prolonged phases of military rule, the most recent ending in 2008. The army is still pulling the strings behind the scenes. Army leaders became impatient with former Prime Minister Imran Khan trying to influence and delay military appointments (Reuters, 26 October 2021) and passed a no-confidence motion against him in April 2022. Shehbaz Sharif became the new Prime Minister, immediately facing a barrage of challenges. He announced a [caretaker government](#) would take over in August 2023 (Dawn, 16 July 2023). On 7 August 2023, Ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan was [sentenced](#) to three years in prison on charges of corruption (Reuters, 7 August 2023). Although a caretaker government took over in August to prepare the upcoming elections (due by November 2023 at the latest), voting has been [delayed](#) several

months to 8 February 2024 since the government announced it intended to include the results of a new census, making it constitutionally mandatory for new constituency boundaries to be drawn up (Reuters, 5 August 2023).

96% of the population is Muslim, of which the majority follow the Sunni tradition. According to the constitution, the right to free speech is subject to the restrictions necessary to ensure “the glory of Islam”.

Christians are victims of roughly a quarter of all blasphemy accusations despite being less than 2% of the population. [Business rivals accuse Christian men](#) of blasphemy as a means of destroying their business and reputation.

Additionally, Christians and people from other minority communities typically occupy lower status jobs and have been referred to as “Chura”, a derogatory word reserved for road sweepers or sewage cleaners meaning “filthy”.

Former Prime Minister Khan [acknowledged](#) that Pakistan has official links with Islamic militant groups and gave into their demands on several occasions.

Christians in Pakistan suffer from the volatile security situation and the high level of violence and lack the necessary channels for seeking protection. The police force is more interested in appeasing local strongmen

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

<sup>2</sup> Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

and keeping things calm than in implementing the law and protecting minorities. Courts - at least the higher ones - have a slightly better track-record in this respect. However, when they are finally in a position to judge a case, Christians have often languished in prison for years before any ruling is made.

Girls from religious minorities are commonly targeted for abduction, forced conversion and forced marriage (CEDAW, 2020, p.10). Statistics reveal that over 1,000 Christian and Hindu girls, typically between 12 and 25 years, are kidnapped, forced to convert, and married off to Muslim men, annually (Forbes, 2020). As noted in a report by CREID (2020, p.55) ideologically targeted sexual abuse is directed specifically at religious minorities, both for sexual predation but also as a 'conquest' to win the girl over to the majority religion.

## How the situation varies by region

Since most Christians live in Punjab Province, many incidents of persecution, discrimination and intolerance occur there. However, next to Punjab, the province of Sindh is also notorious for being a hotspot for bonded labor, affecting many Christians as well.

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation, but they cannot attend churches all over the country; their church attendance is mostly limited to the cities. Expatriate Christians face high pressure, but there is only a small number of them.

### Historical Christian communities

The Roman Catholic Church and Church of Pakistan (Anglican Church) are examples of this category. The Church of Pakistan is an interdenominational grouping of historical churches uniting Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran and others. As the most visible churches, they increasingly face hostilities which include challenges in getting permits to meet, and abductions or forced conversions of their members. They have to put up with being controlled and monitored. Especially in the cities, buildings and plots of land owned by the historical churches can be preyed upon by developers and authorities.

### Converts to Christianity

Christians with a Muslim background suffer the brunt of religious freedom violations both from radical Islamic groups (who see them as apostates) and from their families, friends and neighbors who see conversion as a shameful act of betrayal. There is also a small community of converts from a Hindu background.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal groups have come under closer scrutiny and are frequently harassed and attacked, especially when they are active in outreach among Muslims, although most of their growth comes from Christians transferring from the historical churches.



## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Islamic oppression blended with ethno-religious hostility

Pakistan is home to dozens of radical Islamic groups. Increasingly, advisory bodies to the government are completely made up of Islamic scholars who influence the laws. Thousands of madrassas are being run without government scrutiny of how they are funded or what they are teaching. Anyone calling for reform of blasphemy laws is openly threatened by radicals who believe “infidels” deserve death. Banned radical groups often do not dissolve but rebrand, [go online](#) or merge with an existing group. Religious sentiments and resulting mob violence are easily stirred up and are targeted against religious minorities, especially Christians, showcased in the August 2023 violence in Jaranwala.

Pakistan suffers from ethnic fragmentation. Baluchistan Province and the central Sindh regions are considered beyond the reach of the state authorities. Religious minorities are seen as impure, both for religious reasons and because they do not belong to the ruling ethnic groups.

### Organized corruption and crime

Corruption in politics, the justice system and the military is rampant. Organized crime is a big problem in urban and tribal areas and is frequently connected to violent Islamic militancy. In Karachi, gangs, extortionists and mafia are

all part of the landscape and enjoy political patronage due to influential connections. Bonded labor is an old but still widespread form of slavery, affecting thousands of Christians in rural areas. Laborers become trapped, unable to repay their loans due to high interest rates. They have no legal way of registering complaints. Rich landlords collude with local politicians, benefiting greatly from this system. Land-grabbing also takes place; churches are expropriated and Christians are chased away from their land.

### Dictatorial paranoia

The government has to contend with strong opposition from the ousted Prime Minister Khan and the masses he is able to mobilize. The government also faces corruption charges, increasingly assertive radical groups and a powerful independent army, with whom it must remain on good terms. As elections are approaching in the first quarter of 2024, the government and political parties are trying to win over voters and stay in or even extend power by all means necessary. Christians easily become political pawns. They can be courted by the government and army to stay in power or discriminated against if that is beneficial. Since the army wants to please some radical groups, the targeting of Christians, while not army policy, is considered necessary collateral damage.



## How are men and women differently affected?

### Women

Reports indicate the number of Christian girls who are abducted, raped, forced to convert and “marry” their abductor is increasing. Such “marriages” are used to place the under-age girls beyond other means of legal recourse available to their parents. This is widely utilized and strategically targeted against minority faith communities. Many families never see their girls again, and the authorities rarely take action to bring perpetrators to justice. Women and girls are also at risk of sexual violence in the public sphere, including in workplaces (such as brick kilns) and schools.

#### Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- False charges
- Forced marriage
- Targeted seduction
- Trafficking
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

### Men

Christian men live in constant fear of blasphemy allegations, destruction of property, imprisonment, beatings and execution. There are reports of Christian boys being subject to sexual abuse. Christian men are often compelled to take lower status jobs and are considered impure. They are often referred to as “Chura”, a derogatory word meaning “filthy”. While there is also a Christian middle class and not all hold lower status jobs, discrimination and social inferiority are ubiquitous. Men and boys might also be trapped in cycles of bonded labor.

#### Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- False charges
- Trafficking
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	7	87
2023	7	86
2022	8	87
2021	5	88
2020	5	88

*The very high and extremely high scores for pressure in the individual spheres of life virtually stayed unchanged. This confirms the fact that Pakistan continues to be one of the countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian. The violence score has stayed at the maximum level for many years now. The widely publicized attacks against the Christian community in Jaranwala in August 2023 illustrates that violence against Christians is ever present, although not always as focused and easily visible as in the present case. Pakistan has continued to score the maximum for killings and attacks on church buildings. The country’s notorious blasphemy laws, which have been expanded in scope and increased in penalty in the reporting period, continue to be a threat to Christians. Christian girls continue to be abducted and forcefully converted and married on a frequent basis.*



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## Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **16 May 2023:** Two schoolgirls were killed when a school guard opened fire at a Catholic school in Sangota, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (UCA News, 17 May 2023).
- **6 June 2023:** Shazia Imran, a 40-year-old widow in Lahore, was killed when she refused to marry a Muslim and convert to Islam (Morning Star News, 3 July 2023).
- **16 August 2023:** After incorrect accusations of blasphemy against two Christians, a mob attacked the Christian settlement in the city of Jaranwala, Punjab province. At least 17 (other sources say 21) churches were attacked and partly burned, more than 100 houses of Christians were attacked and hundreds of Christians were fleeing for their lives (AP News, 4 September 2023).

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Christians' private property damaged or confiscated
2024	14	40	100*	1000*
2023	12	10	10*	12

*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

Christians avoid talking about their faith with Muslims because blasphemy laws can mean dangerous consequences. Even Facebook posts can be risky if the content is seen as challenging Islamic values. As a country expert explained: "Government agencies are policing social media and the Christian pastors and parents have been warning the young people about the dangers of using social media to express their views." It is dangerous for Pakistani Christians to keep Christian materials beyond their immediate personal use as they could be suspected of evangelizing Muslims. Displaying a Christian symbol or having a Christian name can trigger discrimination or vandalism of property. Reports of Christians wearing a cross, being spat at or targeted aggressively in the street, in traffic or at a workplace, are indicators that the situation is becoming more difficult.

### Family life

In small towns and remote villages, Christian children have to attend Islamic teaching at the local madrasa while Christian teaching is restricted to Sunday services. Christian parents will try to prevent their children from speaking about their faith, since they could be pressured to "come back" to Islam. Christian parents are visited to pressure them into sending

their children to Islamic events and teaching them Arabic on the pretence of bettering their grades. This confuses children and makes them vulnerable to forced conversion. At school, Christian children are often not allowed to use the same water fountain as their Muslim classmates to avoid "defiling" the drinking water. Children are often bullied, and many are asked to clean the latrines or sweep the floor, as Christians are commonly perceived as being sweepers. This attitude also has its background in caste considerations, since the majority of Christians come from lower caste backgrounds. Some school books incite hatred against Christians. The new school curriculum further Islamizes education and educates children that adherents of other religions are inferior. This policy is harming Christian families.

### Community life

Christians are monitored by the State and increasingly by non-state actors. Even expatriate Christians are called by the local panchayat (village council) to explain why they believe in Christ and to accept Islam. During the COVID-19 crisis, there was a campaign by radical Islamists to force conversions using food rations, which would be given to Christians who recited the Islamic creed (many young people did this, while others starved to death or committed

suicide). At the same time, Christian nurses were asked to work at the forefront of infection wards. In workplaces, the pressure against Christians is often so great that they have to change jobs multiple times to avoid being made to convert to Islam. Christians are frequently forced to do menial work like sweeping or carrying water. A very [good illustration](#) is the 5% quota, which had been introduced to guarantee jobs for minorities in the government sector. Out of the total vacant posts, a huge 43% were reserved for minorities. In absolute numbers, there were more than 30,000 positions for minorities vacant at the end of September 2021. Christians are seen as unclean, so their use of shared facilities is thought to defile Muslims, a [heritage of the caste system](#).

### **National life**

Pakistan adopted an Islamic Constitution in 1973 and Sharia law in its civil code. The recent Islamization process began with the 1986 introduction of blasphemy laws, which affect minorities and are often used for settling personal scores. The Senate

has passed a bill to [tighten](#) the country's notorious blasphemy law by (among other things) increasing the punishment from three to ten years' imprisonment (Dawn, 8 August 2023). Christians are under-represented in the political arena and their views are often ignored. Politicians deny that it is necessary to protect religious minority girls from abductions and forced conversion/ marriage.

### **Church life**

Church activities are monitored. Security guards are provided by the authorities, but they also listen, report and likely pass intelligence on to radical Islamic groups. Despite the State's promise to protect churches, there have been several attacks with dozens of victims. Church leaders are primary targets for harassment, as they are the most visible representatives of the Christian minority. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is strongly opposed, so it would be dangerous for a church to openly include converts. Advocacy for oppressed minorities is seen as a challenge to the government.



# International obligations & rights violated

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

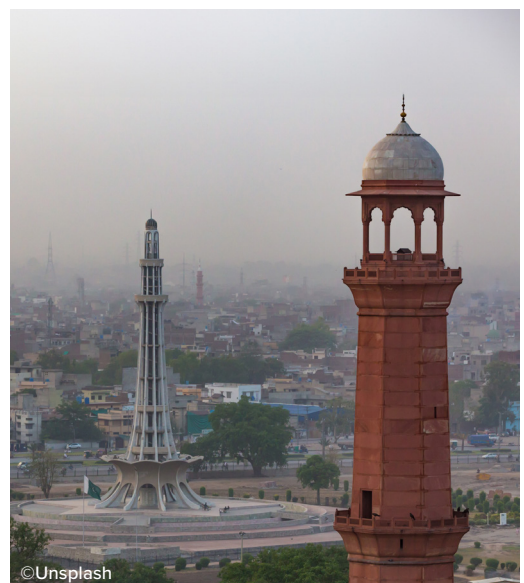
1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination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

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

- Christians are pressured by their community to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian women and girls are abducted, raped and gang-raped (ICCPR Art. 7)
- Christian girls are forced to marry their abductor and converted by force (ICCPR Art. 23; CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art. 10)
- Christian girls are trafficked into slave labor and sex trade (CRC Art. 34 and ICCPR Art. 8)
- Christians are falsely accused, charged of blasphemy and sentenced to death (ICCPR Art. 19)
- Christians are assumed to take jobs that are considered “dishonorable” and “low” because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26 and ICESCR Art 11)

## Situation of other religious minorities

Religious minorities are extremely vulnerable. Ahmadis are considered non-Muslim and have been denied ID cards and forced to sign documents declaring the finality of the Prophet Mohammed, which goes against their belief. More than 170 Ahmadi graves and several houses of worship were desecrated. Meanwhile, after the spokesperson of Indian ruling party BJP made controversial statements about the Prophet Muhammad in June 2022, a Hindu temple in Karachi was destroyed (USCIRF, Country Update Pakistan, 5 August 2022). Hindu females suffer from abductions and forced [conversions](#). Armed sectarian groups target Shia Muslims, including the Hazara community. There is no provision in the law for atheists, who are targeted by blasphemy laws.





## Open Doors in Pakistan

Open Doors is active in Persian Gulf countries through the ALIVE network of partner churches.



#### 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.*

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