

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

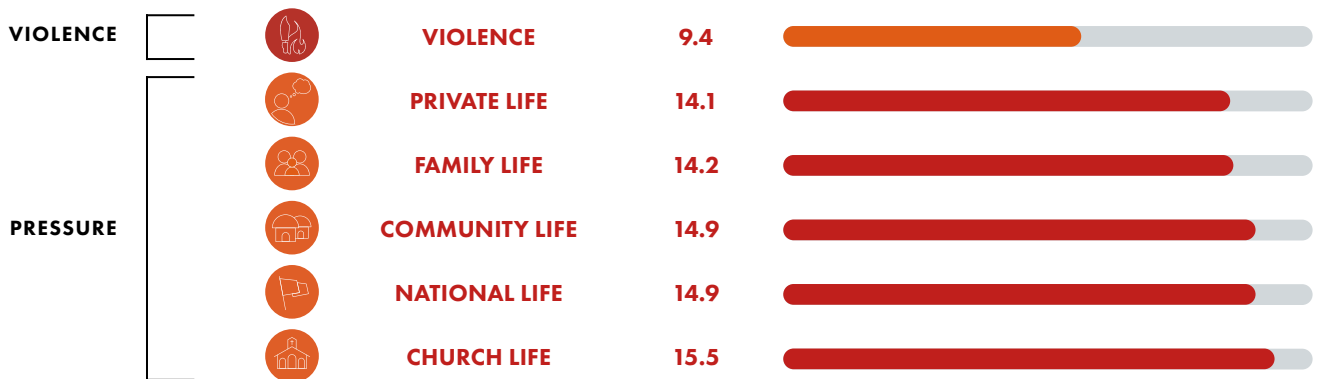
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
10

Sudan



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 situation for Christians is currently defined by three things. First, the perception and pledge that the Sudanese government has moved away from the old repressive laws and policies, but with implementation lacking. According to local experts, the international narrative about Sudan is eclipsing reality on the ground. Secondly, communities' perception of Christians hasn't changed since the fall of the al-Bashir regime in the country. Christians are afraid of speaking out about their faith for fear of being targeted by radical groups. Converts and ethnic African Christians in particular face severe violations. Finally, the Janjaweed militias are still very active in the country, adding to the levels of pressure and fear.

Quick facts

LEADER

Lieutenant-General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan

POPULATION

45,992,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

2,000,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	2,000,000	4.3
Muslims	42,334,000	92.0
Ethno-religionists	1,167,000	2.5
Agnostics	415,000	0.9

Source²

Sudan is one of the most complex countries in Africa. Three key events have defined Sudan on the international scene: the Darfur crisis, which led to the indictment of former President al-Bashir and other senior government officials; the civil war, which led to the independence of South Sudan; and the plight of the Nuba people.

In 2011, South Sudan became an independent nation. In April 2019, President Omar al-Bashir was ousted, and a new transitional government was established with the aim of paving the way for democracy in the next three to four years. The Transitional Council was led by the army, to transition to civilian leadership until elections were to be held. However, the process was interrupted

when on 25 October 2021, the military performed a coup, leading to weeks of civil unrest. In July 2022, the military leadership indicated that it would step down and allow the civilian government to assume power.

Demographically, the country is majority-Muslim and Christians have been systematically persecuted for decades. Under former President al-Bashir, religious police and armed Islamic militias persecuted Christians. The system was so repressive for freedom of religion that Sudan was designated as a country of particular concern by the US state department for over two decades. There are also different armed groups in the country. The change in the government's policy has not produced change in the attitude in the society. Society at large sees Sudanese national identity as an integral part of Islam.

How the situation varies by region

Pressure and violence targeting Christians has always been more intense outside the capital city. In addition to the harassment and threats that Christians face in their daily lives, they are affected more in areas such as Darfur, the Nuba Mountain, and the Blue Nile regions as a result of the armed conflict.

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

² 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

Expatriates are being forced to close their churches. These are groups mainly from western countries and South Sudan. Their churches have been denied registration and many have faced demolition. Some expatriate Christians face arrest and detention without legal due process.

Historical Christian communities

Christians belonging to historical churches such as the Coptic Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches face violations due to both Islamic oppression and dictatorial paranoia. Former President al-Bashir had a program of church demolition, which included churches belonging to historical Christian communities.

Converts to Christianity

This group, which consists mainly of Christians with a Muslim background, experiences the most intense pressure and violence.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Sudanese Christians who belong to Baptist, Evangelical, and Pentecostal denominations experience violations in the form of Islamic oppression and dictatorial paranoia. This group is also facing the prospect of having most of its churches in the country closed down.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression:

The Muslim Brotherhood's ideology has had immense influence on Sudan's government since a coup in 1989 installed President al-Bashir as leader. The regime subsequently worked towards forming an Islamic state at the expense of other religious groups in the country. It was accused of supporting radical Islamic militants (including sheltering Osama bin Laden), sponsoring and harboring terrorism, and trafficking weapons.

Dictatorial paranoia:

Sudan has struggled to maintain civil order since its independence more than six decades ago. While the independence conflict with the south looks like it is finally coming to a close, the Darfur crisis, a multipolar civil war between pro- and anti-government militias, continues. In the past, government leaders have used inflammatory anti-Western rhetoric as a means to strengthen the regime in Khartoum. This has led to increased anti-Christian violence, as the government views Christians as agents of the West.

Organized corruption and crime:

The government of Sudan under President al-Bashir employed all means available to stay in power, including the mobilization of tribal militias. Many of these militias committed human rights violations, including human trafficking of non-Arabs as a means to profit from the conflict. Christians, viewed as both foreign and a threat to the nation, were targeted with particular brutality by these Islamist groups.

Ethno-religious hostility blended with Clan oppression:

The Sudanese population consists of about 19 different ethnic groups of mostly Arab origin in the north, and African origin in the south. The Arabs have, since gaining their independence, pursued a policy of Islamic and Arab superiority and nationalism.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Under the transitional government, there have been positive changes impacting women’s rights and safety. In July 2020, it was announced that the apostasy law would be eliminated, that women would no longer require a permit from a male relative to travel, and that female genital mutilation (FGM) would be banned. Notwithstanding these positive developments, female Christians, particularly converts, continue to face tremendous challenges and the military coup in October 2021 threatened the progress of women’s rights. Converts remain vulnerable to rape, physical violence, forced marriage and domestic violence.

- Abduction
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Forced to flee town / country
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Violent Islamic militancy continues to plague many African nations and has led to an increase in persecution. The government of Sudan targets male Christians with a variety of serious false charges, including “terrorism”. Church leaders are the most frequent targets, and government security forces monitor their activities daily. Christian men and boys, particularly converts, are vulnerable to beatings, imprisonment, killing, harassment in the workplace, and displacement. Converts may be expelled from their

house and shunned by families. Others feel forced to leave their home due to the pressure of persecution.

- Abduction
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- False charges
- Forced to flee town / country
- Imprisonment by the government
- Military / militia conscription / service against conscience
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	10	83
2022	13	79
2021	13	79
2020	7	85
2019	6	87

Sudan’s score increased by four points from WWL 2022. Prior to that, Sudan had dropped six points in WWL 2021 due to the change in policy and legal framework by the transitional government. Hope for change vanished in October 2021 when the military effectively conducted a coup and Christians were arrested due to their faith. Pressure on Christians and churches is at an extreme level. Churches which had been forced to close have not been re-opened and Christians are still deprived of their rights in many ways.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Christian broadcasting: The Sudan National Broadcasting Corporation’s Sunday TV program is being used as a rallying cry for radical Muslims to accuse Christians of corrupting the nation.
- **April 2022:** A pastor and two others were assaulted by a group of radical Muslims during a church service at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Al Hag Abdalla, about 85 miles south-east of Khartoum in Madani, Al Jazirah state. When the pastor filed a complaint with the police, he was charged with disturbing the peace and later sentenced to a month in prison (Morning Star News, 20 and 25 April 2022).
- At least four Christians were detained and treated inhumanely by the police in Darfur.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Christians forced to marry	Christians physically or mentally abused
2023	0	10*	10*	100*
2022	5	10*	10*	100*

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 openly discussing their faith with the local community for safety reasons; it can lead to government arrest or attack from Islamic militants. This social pressure is reinforced by constant surveillance by the community and police. Keeping Christian materials, such as Bibles, carries significant risk, especially for converts within a Muslim family. If discovered, Christians face severe pressure to return to Islam. If they resist, they risk loss of property, expulsion from the community, and further acts of violence.

Family life

Attempting to raise a Christian family in Sudan is difficult given the pressure from government, community, and civil violence. Because Christians are in the minority and Muslims exert so much pressure on social norms, a Christian marrying a Muslim is expected to convert to Islam. Christian children are often harassed due to their family’s faith, and converts raising Christian children might lose custody of them. Additionally, the government requires school teaching on Islam.

Community life

The communal pressure on Christians in Sudan is immense. Public order laws, based largely on the government’s strict interpretation of Islamic law, are in force in Khartoum. These laws prohibit “indecent



dresses” and other “offenses of honor, reputation, and public morality”. Police have been known to harass and arrest Christians for arbitrary violations using this pretext. Christian communities struggle to access community resources (such as clean drinking water). This is particularly true outside urban areas. The general attitude in society and the government is that Sudanese citizens should be Muslim. The government uses all available opportunities to downgrade and punish Christians by restricting them from using community resources. Christians in the Nuba Mountains and other areas in the south face aerial bombardment from government forces. State-sponsored militia are also known to carry out house searches looking for Christians.

National life

Christians, especially those from South Sudan and Western missionaries, are frequently monitored by government security forces. There is great hope that this will change, as was made public by the transitional government. Hindrances and bans occur where organizations are perceived to be critical of state institutions or are overt about the evangelistic effect of their work. Many international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are barred from the country if known to be Christian.

Church life

Churches are under significant strain in Sudan from the authorities and broader society. At the top, Sudanese officials constantly interfere in the selection of religious leaders. Christians are obstructed from building and maintaining their churches by authorities and mobs. Attempting to make repairs without the consent of the government makes Christians liable to violence. Multiple attacks have been incited by community leaders, goading the people into riots, bombings, and attacks against Christians and their churches. Such violence is more common in remote areas. Sudan’s infrastructure makes reaching these areas with aid and international observers extremely difficult, which enables perpetrators to carry out violence with impunity.



International obligations & rights violated

Sudan 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 on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

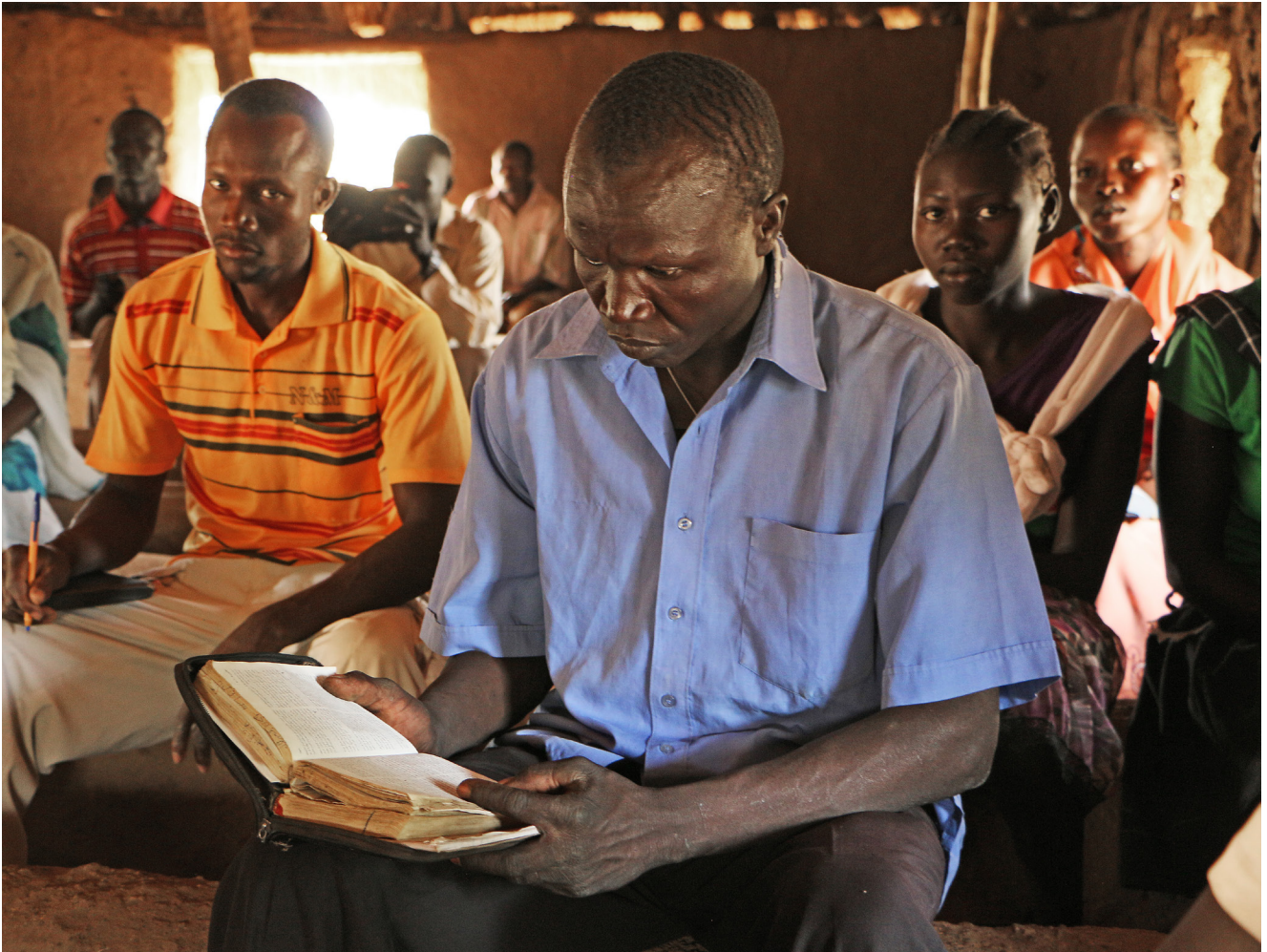
Sudan is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Church buildings are attacked and burnt down (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian women and girls are harassed for not covering their head or wearing trousers (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians can be accused and charged of blasphemy (ICCPR Art. 19)
- Christian children are often harassed due to their parents’ faith (CRC Art. 14 and ICCPR Art. 18)



Situation of other religious minorities

Other religious minorities, such as the Jewish community, also face serious challenges in Sudan. They are targeted by political and religious leaders on television and other forms of media. The Bahá'í community is not recognized in the country and can only operate in secret. Jehovah's Witnesses also face harassment. [Shia Muslims](#) are not allowed to hold worship services (US State Department, IRFR 2021). In summary, any religious group other than Sunni Islam faces tremendous challenges to exercise their faith.



Open Doors in Sudan

Open Doors' vision for Sudan is to see a resilient church that stands strong in the face of persecution and is economically empowered to support itself, through:

- Persecution preparedness programs
- Enhancing discipleship
- Facilitating 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.
