

WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

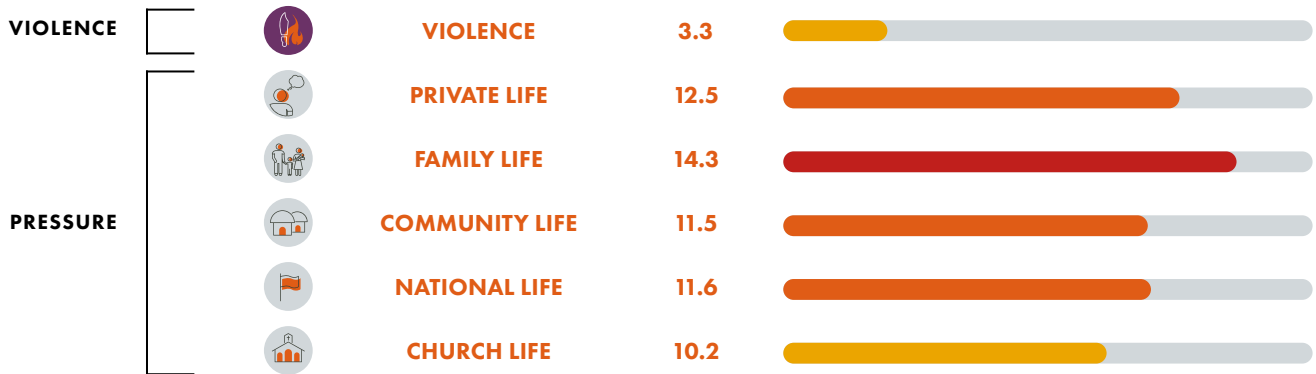
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
50

Malaysia



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).¹ Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

Key findings

Those who leave Islam, including those who become Christians, experience pressure and violence, as every ethnic Malay is expected to be Muslim. Leaving Islam not only violates the Constitution, but also family and society. Roman Catholics, Methodists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are watched by the authorities. However, non-traditional Protestant groups are more often targeted for interference, as these tend to be more active in talking about their faith.

¹World Watch Research measures pressure across all spheres of life as well as violence (full methodology [here](#) – password: freedom).

Quick facts

LEADER

King Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah

POPULATION

33,289,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

3,028,000 (9.1%)²

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Federal Parliamentary Constitutional Monarchy

Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	3,028,000	9.1
Muslims	18,739,000	56.3
Hindus	2,098,000	6.3
Others	6,290,400	18.9

OTHERS include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian. Source³

Malaysia is ruled by a coalition made up of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the hardline Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). There is also a monarchy which rotates every five years among nine regional sultans, who hold veto power in questions concerning Islam. Radical Islamic voices are growing stronger. The PAS in Kelantan State announced it would seek to make the traditional folk ceremony and dance 'Main Puteri' [Sharia-compliant](#) and, a PAS MP publicly called the Bible 'a distorted book' and refused to retract his statement or apologize. The PAS (ruling in the coalition with UMNO) was one of the very few government bodies worldwide to congratulate the Taliban for liberating and ruling Afghanistan. Although the government's motto is 'One Malaysia', the age-old practice of discriminating against non-Malay ethnic minorities has continued unabated by giving priority in public offices and the armed forces to the 'Bumiputra' (people of the soil, or in other words, the Malay population). The slogan 'Keluarga Malaysia' promoted by the new government, in power since September 2021, is suspected to be just the old preferential treatment of Malay people; in reality, a Malay Family.

The [Malaysian Constitution](#) defines 'Malay' as a follower of Islam. There are frequent warnings from Muslim-Malay organizations and politicians against a supposed agenda of [Christianization](#). Malaysia's legal system and its political institutions are strongly influenced by Islam. All children in state-run schools are required to attend Islamic education and at university there is a compulsory subject for all students called 'Islamic and Asian Civilization' which is felt by many to be a government instrument for furthering Islamization.

How the situation varies by region

The situation is the same throughout the country. However, Islamic missionary work among Christians, especially among the Bumiputra, focuses on East Malaysia. Helped by the number of migrating Muslims, Sabah State ceased to be Christian majority several years ago, and Sarawak is now only a Christian majority state on paper.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

Historical Christian communities

These communities consist of Roman Catholic, Anglican and Methodist Christians who suffer some discrimination but less than converts or non-traditional communities.

Converts to Christianity

By law, apostasy is punishable by death, although this has not been implemented. In some regions, Christian converts from a Muslim background can meet together. However, they all face varying degrees of opposition from family, community and the authorities.

Non-traditional Christian communities

This category includes Baptists and Pentecostals. They often face monitoring, discrimination, intimidation and harassment.

²Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

³Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression:

Malaysia was known as a liberal and tolerant Islamic country, but this reputation has been changing in recent years. The government has attempted to introduce Sharia law in the State of Kelantan. In custody matters, civil courts frequently decide in favor of the child's non-Muslim mother, which is why fathers sometimes decide to convert to Islam. This means the claim goes before a Sharia court and custody is granted to the Muslim father. The police prefer to implement the Sharia court's decisions as this causes less trouble for them. The Constitution prohibits Malays from converting to other religions and limits the propagation of non-Muslim religions. Converts can experience violence and pressure to recant from families, who see it as a dishonor.

Dictatorial paranoia:

Both parties in the ruling coalition, UMNO and PAS, advocate for Malay Muslim dominance and preferential treatment. (The UMNO has a history of playing religious and racial cards in order to stay in power.)

Ethno-religious hostility blended with Islamic oppression:

Politics and society are strongly driven by an ethnic impulse of the preservation and superiority of the Malay ethnic group. While this is clearly blended with and dominated by religious motives, as every Malay has to be a Muslim, it has to be mentioned as it clearly plays out in the missionary dakwah movement which has been aggressively pursuing poverty-stricken native communities in East Malaysia with lucrative incentives and benefits.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Women's legal rights are undermined by provisions that make exceptions for Sharia law. Females converting from Islam to Christianity face the risk of sexual violence and/or forced marriage to a Muslim. 'Love traps' have been reported, whereby Muslim men pursue Christian women to marry them and encourage them to convert to Islam. Forced marriages of Christian women sometimes occur to secure financial support for the family. The COVID-19 crisis reportedly caused an increase in domestic violence, which is likely to have impacted Christians in such marriages.

- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological
- Violence - sexual

MEN

Following a period of political instability, the new government is a concern for Malaysian Christians. The government had pledged to sign the UN Declaration regarding the elimination of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief, but extreme conservative Muslim groups strongly oppose this as they fear it will encourage apostasy and proselytism of Muslims. Men and boys are often the target of such groups. The persecution typically impacting Christian men comes in the form of bullying at the hands of vigilante justice, or monitoring by religious authorities.

- Violence - physical
- Violence - verbal



WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution score out of 100
2022	50	63.45
2021	46	63.25
2020	40	62.48
2019	42	59.83
2018	23	65.30

The score in WWL 2022 remained almost the same as WWL 2021, with an increase of only 0.2 points. The violence score increased by a further 0.9 points but remained on a 'fairly high' level.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **In May 2021**, in a doctored Facebook video which went viral, the archbishop of Kuala Lumpur, Julian Leow, was accused of following an alleged 25-year plan to slowly eradicate the Muslim majority. He had earlier used the analogy of 'boiling the frog' to describe the situation Christian community are facing.
- **In April 2021**, a Christian MP, Steven Sim, was accused of 'Christianizing' when he handed out support for people in his constituency who were struggling with the economic fallout from the pandemic.

WWL Year	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government	Christians abducted	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians forced to flee their countries
2022	1	3	1000	10
2021	0	3	1	8

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - see [here](#) for full results. 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

Malay Muslims are not legally allowed to convert from Islam in any state except Sarawak, where the process is long and tedious. The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) wants the penalty for apostasy to be death, but so far, those efforts have been stalled. Converts to Christianity from Islam can be punished or sent to an Islamic ‘purification center’ where they are pressured into returning to Islam. There is a guideline from the Fatwa Department which says that Christmas trees and decorations should not be used if a Muslim plans to attend a Christmas event. It also forbids Muslims from attending Christmas functions that have ‘speech or gestures in the form of a praise to the non-Muslim religion’.

Family life

Children born to couples where one parent is a Muslim are automatically registered as Muslims and need both parents’ consent for official conversion.

Education is biased towards a Malay and Islam centric worldview, discriminating against minorities. All Muslim children must attend Islamic education in schools and children of converts can be harassed, discriminated against and put under pressure to convert to Islam. It is very common for Christian children to be bullied by their peers at school and beyond, with belittling and demeaning slurs which are often intertwined with racial slurs.

Community life

Public universities are still adopting the quota system whereby Bumiputra students (Malays and indigenous people) have a higher quota while non-Bumiputra students have fewer available places. Article 153 of the constitution allows a quota system for entering the civil service. Hence, preference is given to Malays in the public sector and ethnic and religious minorities are not accepted. Consequently, ethnic and religious minorities rarely apply for these positions.

National life

The Constitution prohibits adherents of other religions from propagating their religion among Malay Muslims. It is virtually impossible for ethnic Malays to legally convert to the Christian faith, since the Constitution stands against it and they can be charged with apostasy. Non-Malay owned companies are required to have at least one Malay as board member. Christians are frequently slandered in government owned media. The most prominent example was a slandorous video of Archbishop Julian Leow of Kuala Lumpur, published on Facebook in May 2021, where he was accused of following an alleged 25-year plan to slowly boil away the Muslim majority. At around the same time, an e-book with the title ‘Exposing the Christian Agenda’ was published in Malaysia.

Church life

It is very risky for churches to integrate Malay converts, especially in West Malaysia, and so they meet in secret. Church leaders have been natural targets for hostility from religion based or ethnic groups, especially when their churches are perceived as engaging in acts of evangelism among Muslims. The abduction of Pastor Raymond Koh in broad daylight in February 2017 sent shockwaves through the Christian community. His whereabouts is still unknown, and the perpetrators have not been found. Findings point to the involvement of the special branch of the police.

In March 2021, the High Court finally ruled that the ban of the use of the word of ‘Allah’ was unconstitutional. The then-government declared to appeal this ruling, so there is still uncertainty about the use of the word ‘Allah’ for ‘God’.

In the reporting period of the WWL 2022, a deputy minister announced that the federal government had drafted four new laws to strengthen Sharia law in Malaysia. Among them is a law to control the development of non-Muslim religions. Although the Law Minister said that no such proposal had been submitted in the final draft, churches and members of other religious minorities were alarmed and claimed that such a law would contradict the constitutional provisions of Malaysia. Even though the draft was not accepted this time, it is a sign that religious minorities in Malaysia are facing ever more organized opposition and limitations.



International obligations & rights violated

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

1. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
2. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

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

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

Situation of other religious minorities

Shiites continue to be seen as a threat since they deviate from Sunni Islam. Hindus, adherents to traditional Chinese religions and Buddhists are, as Christians, affected by the government's preferential treatment of ethnic Malays.



Open Doors in Malaysia

Open Doors' work to strengthen the church in Malaysia includes the following:

- Discipling and equipping Christians on how to respond biblically to persecution and be obedient to God, especially the Great Commission
- Providing local language Bibles and other Christian literature
- Facilitating gatherings to foster unity and overcome racial divisions
- Providing socio-economic assistance to needy believers



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: © 2021 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- 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 2022 ranking and reports, can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
