

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

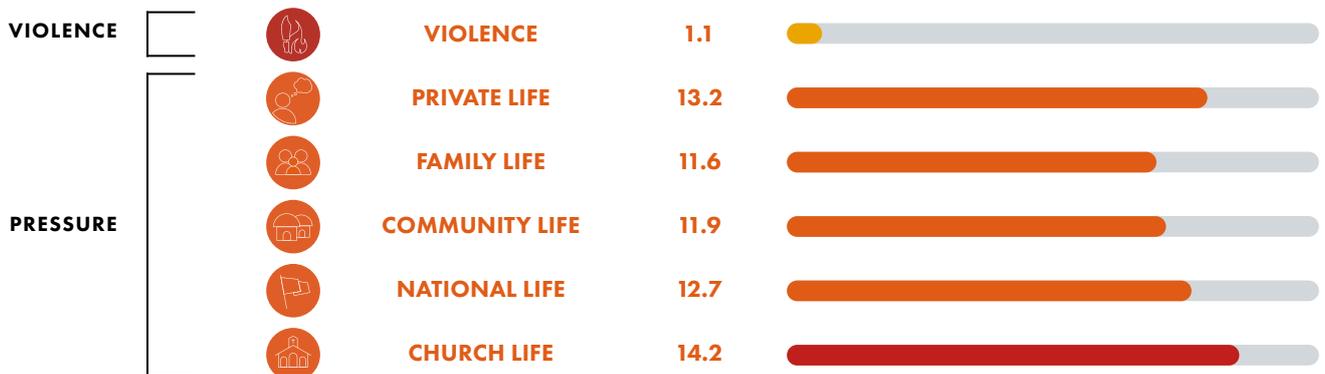
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
48

Kazakhstan



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

Freedom of religion or belief is restricted by legislation introduced in September 2011. Using the threat of militant Islam as a pretext, the Kazakh government keeps society under tight control, including increased surveillance, raids on meetings and arrests. Russian Orthodox churches experience the fewest problems from the government, as they do not usually attempt to contact the Kazakh population. It is the indigenous Christian converts, from a Muslim background, who experience severe violations from the state, family, and community.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev

POPULATION

19,205,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

4,876,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	4,876,000	25.4
Muslims	13,567,000	70.6
Agnostics	587,000	3.1
Ethno-religionist	30,500	0.2

Source²

A former Soviet republic, Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991 and is the wealthiest country in the region. Since 2010, the government has become more dictatorial, characterized by repressive policies, no real opposition and strict media control. The situation has not improved since President Tokayev took power in 2019.

Sunni Islam is the main religion and Kazakhs are expected to be Muslims. This makes life challenging for converts to Christianity, especially in rural areas. However, it would be wrong to call Kazakhstan a Muslim country. Most Kazakhs follow the traditions rather than teachings of Islam, and 70 years of Soviet atheism have left their mark; the government is staunchly secular. A large Russian minority in the north is the reason Kazakhstan has the largest number of Christians in Central Asia. Over 90% of Christians in Kazakhstan belong to the Russian Orthodox Church. Christians in Kazakhstan play no

role in the country's politics. There is no Christian political party.

Religious affairs legislation introduced in September 2011 included religious communities needing to re-register, a ban on unregistered religious activity, restricted production and dissemination of religious materials in-country, and a prohibition on religious activities for children such as summer camps. The [authorities](#) raid services, punish speech “inciting religious discord” and detain individuals for “illegal missionary activity”. Since 2019, the right to freedom of religion or belief has been [more respected](#), with the government abandoning proposed amendments that would have tightened the 2011 legislation. Religious Freedom Roundtables with minority groups have been held, and administrative prosecutions for religious offenses are declining. In January 2022, changes made to the Religion Law widened state religious censorship and made holding religious meetings away from state-registered places of worship more difficult.

How the situation varies by region

Rights violations targeting all Christian communities and carried out by government officials can occur all over the country. Pressure from family, friends, and the community on converts is stronger outside urban areas.

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

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

Historical Christian communities

Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) have relative freedom since they are not involved in evangelism among Kazakhs and therefore not seen as a threat. Also, the Kazakh government has no interest in provoking Russia by making difficulties for the ROC.

Converts to Christianity

Converts with a Muslim background suffer under restrictions from the state, and face severe pressure from family and community.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Baptist, Evangelical, and Pentecostal congregations are unregistered and experience raids, threats, arrests, and fines from the authorities, especially if they are active in evangelism.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Dictatorial paranoia:

Only state-controlled religious institutions are allowed. The authorities raid and arrest members of unregistered religious groups, especially Protestants, who are regarded as a foreign influence aiming to destroy the current political system.

Islamic oppression blended with Clan oppression:

Converts to Christianity from a Muslim background experience pressure and sometimes violence from family and community. This can include domestic incarceration or expulsion from home. Kazakh leaders (with the support of the authorities) see conversion as an assault on Kazakh identity. Many converts choose to keep their new faith a secret.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Kazakh law gives equal rights to men and women. However, in practice, traditionalist views that consider women subservient to men prevail. There are few effective measures to address gender-based violence, polygamy, child and forced marriages, bride kidnapping, and pervasive domestic violence. Female converts risk greater levels of physical and verbal abuse, harassment, threats, and house arrest. Forced marriage to a Muslim is not uncommon, and occasionally is linked to abduction. It is difficult for women to escape these pressures due to high unemployment and limited financial independence.

- Abduction
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Violence – physical
- Violence – verbal

MEN

Men tend to have higher levels of responsibility in the public sphere; the religious persecution that men experience reflects this sociocultural structure. They risk interrogation, fines, detention, and imprisonment. Obligatory military service for young men is an extra potential risk in a highly controlled environment in a Muslim-majority state. Converts from a Muslim background experience pressure from their families, typically facing verbal harassment and physical beatings. Job loss is also a risk for converts and church leaders, which then affects their dependent families.

- Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings, and rites
- Denied inheritance or possessions

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

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	48	65
2022	47	64
2021	41	64
2020	35	64
2019	34	63

Kazakhstan's score increased by one point compared to WWL 2022. This is mainly because of a rise in pressure in the Community and Church spheres of life. Life in both these spheres is dominated by the two main persecution engines, dictatorial paranoia and Islamic oppression. While Muslim families, friends, and villagers exert pressure on converts (to Christianity) in particular, the government imposes many restrictions on church activities.



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Examples of violence in the reporting period

- At least two Christians were arrested because of their faith.
- One woman was raped, beaten, and almost killed by a Muslim taxi driver because she was non-indigenous and a Christian.
- Sources reported that 25 converts (both men and women) faced harassment at the hands of their Muslim relatives and communities, mostly in rural areas.

WWL Year	Christians raped and / or sexually assaulted	Christians detained	Christians physically or mentally abused
2023	1	2	25
2022	0	8	31

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

Conversion from Islam to Christianity is seen as a betrayal of family and Kazakh culture. In rural areas, converts can suffer physical violence, so they refrain from talking about their new faith and hide Christian materials that could be used as evidence of conversion. Non-traditional Protestants can easily be accused of evangelizing by the state authorities.

Family life

Children of Christians are discriminated against on account of their parents' faith, and Muslim children are often encouraged not to mix with them. They may be pressurized to attend Islamic classes against their parents' will. Schools periodically organize state-funded public meetings about combating "sects" that spread negative propaganda against religious minorities, including Evangelicals. These meetings are supposedly voluntary, but everyone is strongly urged to attend. The adoption of a Kazakh child into a Christian family is not permitted.

Community life

Converts to Christianity from Islam are monitored, interrogated, and threatened by their families and communities. Unregistered churches are monitored and raided by the local authorities. Members can be threatened, fined, or detained for illegal religious activities. Once they appear in police records, Christians are required to report regularly.

National life

The Constitution recognizes the state-supported Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church. All other religious communities are required to re-register according to the 2011 law. The process is complicated and limits the possibility for non-traditional organizations to operate on an official basis.

Church life

Faith-based schools and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are not allowed. Any social work carried out by Christians is seen as a form of outreach and is opposed. Printing and distributing religious literature is restricted.



International obligations & rights violated

Kazakhstan 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)

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

- Churches from non-traditional denominations are raided and attendees arbitrarily arrested (ICCPR Arts. 9; 18 and 21)
- Ownership and consultation of religious literature is severely restricted beyond international permitted limitations (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Christians and their activities are monitored by the authorities and the surrounding community (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christian female converts run the risk of being abducted and forcibly married to Muslim men (ICCPR Art. 23; CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art. 10)



Situation of other religious minorities

Kazakhstan's Constitution [defines it](#) as a secular state. Authorities restrict non-traditional religious groups including Muslims who practice a version of Islam other than the officially-recognized Hanafi school of Sunni Islam.



Open Doors in Kazakhstan

Open Doors strengthens the persecuted church in Central Asia, primarily through:

- Literature distribution
- Prayer support
- Biblical training
- Children / youth training
- Women ministry
- Advocacy and awareness training (SSTS)
- Presence ministry
- Vocational training
- Social economic development projects

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.
