

World  
Watch  
Research

## Colombia: Full Country Dossier

Revised: May 2023



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

Revised: May 2023

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2023

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	94	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.7	92	91	92	92	91
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	88	87	85	86
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.2	89	88	88	87	86
5	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.1	16.3	9.1	88	91	92	90	87
6	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.6	14.8	14.4	16.7	88	87	85	80	80
7	Pakistan	13.4	13.8	14.8	14.8	12.9	16.7	86	87	88	88	87
8	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.8	15.8	16.5	10.7	86	85	86	85	85
9	Afghanistan	15.4	15.7	15.4	16.1	16.6	4.6	84	98	94	93	94
10	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	9.4	83	79	79	85	87
11	India	12.3	13.1	13.0	14.8	13.3	15.7	82	82	83	83	83
12	Syria	13.2	14.1	13.6	14.1	14.1	11.3	80	78	81	82	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.9	15.8	16.7	2.4	80	81	78	79	77
14	Myanmar	12.5	11.6	13.9	13.9	12.9	15.4	80	79	74	73	71
15	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.8	16.0	16.4	0.2	77	77	77	78	78
16	China	12.9	10.0	12.7	14.5	15.6	11.1	77	76	74	70	65
17	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	10.3	15.1	15.0	76	70	67	66	68
18	Iraq	14.1	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	4.6	76	78	82	76	79
19	Algeria	14.1	14.1	11.5	13.7	15.1	4.8	73	71	70	73	70
20	Mauritania	14.5	14.2	13.3	14.1	14.2	1.3	72	70	71	68	67
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	13.9	12.7	15.6	1.5	71	71	71	73	74
22	Colombia	11.8	8.9	13.1	11.3	10.4	15.4	71	68	67	62	58
23	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.5	9.6	13.8	15.6	71	68	67	66	48
24	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	68	66	68	70
25	Vietnam	11.8	9.6	12.8	14.6	14.4	6.9	70	71	72	72	70
26	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	14.1	15.7	0.6	70	69	70	70	69
27	Cuba	13.1	8.3	13.1	13.2	14.9	7.0	70	66	62	52	49
28	Niger	9.4	9.5	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.4	70	68	62	60	52
29	Morocco	13.2	13.8	10.9	12.2	14.5	4.8	69	69	67	66	63
30	Bangladesh	12.6	10.7	12.8	11.3	10.6	10.7	69	68	67	63	58
31	Laos	11.7	10.2	13.3	14.2	14.0	5.0	68	69	71	72	71
32	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.6	68	65	63	43	43
33	Indonesia	11.3	12.0	11.6	11.1	9.2	12.8	68	68	63	60	65
34	Qatar	14.2	14.1	10.5	13.2	14.4	1.5	68	74	67	66	62
35	Egypt	12.7	13.5	11.6	12.1	10.8	7.0	68	71	75	76	76
36	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.4	12.0	13.5	6.5	67	66	67	64	63
37	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.6	67	66	64	56	55
38	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	11.0	10.5	13.9	67	65	64	60	61
39	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.4	12.1	10.6	66	66	65	63	65
40	Bhutan	13.2	12.3	11.6	13.9	14.2	1.1	66	67	64	61	64
41	Turkey	12.8	11.5	11.8	13.0	11.5	5.7	66	65	69	63	66
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.5	66	63	62	57	56
43	Malaysia	12.8	14.3	11.4	12.2	11.1	3.9	66	63	63	62	60
44	Tajikistan	13.8	12.2	12.3	12.8	13.4	1.1	66	65	66	65	65
45	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.9	65	65	64	60	54
46	Brunei	14.8	14.6	10.1	10.9	14.4	0.4	65	64	64	63	63
47	Oman	14.0	14.1	10.3	13.3	12.9	0.6	65	66	63	62	59
48	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.6	11.9	12.7	14.2	1.1	65	64	64	64	63
49	Jordan	13.0	14.0	10.5	12.3	12.7	2.0	65	66	64	64	65
50	Nicaragua	10.8	5.9	11.9	12.8	13.6	9.4	65	56	51	41	41

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.3	64	63	62	61	61
52	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	64	63	62	60
53	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.6	63	61	58	55	52
54	UAE	13.4	13.4	9.9	11.2	12.8	1.1	62	62	62	60	58
55	Nepal	12.0	9.8	9.4	13.0	12.6	4.4	61	64	66	64	64
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	0.6	60	59	56	56	56
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.3	9.7	10.3	12.0	2.0	60	59	58	60	57
58	Azerbaijan	13.2	10.0	9.5	12.0	13.6	0.6	59	60	56	57	57
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.2	11.0	10.4	12.0	2.0	59	58	58	57	56
60	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	7.6	58	55	53	56	48
61	Russian Federation	12.3	7.9	10.3	11.8	12.8	2.0	57	56	57	60	60
62	Sri Lanka	12.8	9.1	10.6	11.3	9.5	3.9	57	63	62	65	58
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	8.9	57	50	42	42	41
64	Venezuela	6.0	4.6	11.7	10.2	11.4	11.7	56	51	39	42	41
65	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	11.1	55	52	48	48	43
66	Bahrain	12.7	13.3	8.7	10.7	8.8	0.9	55	57	56	55	55
67	Honduras	7.1	5.0	11.9	7.6	9.8	11.9	53	48	46	39	38
68	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	51	46	43	42
69	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	9.2	14.8	51	48	47	48	47
70	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	5.4	49	44	43	41	42
71	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	3.0	48	43	47	45	46
72	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.0	46	43	43	44	44
73	El Salvador	7.7	4.2	10.6	7.4	9.1	6.7	46	45	42	38	30
74	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	42	42	42	43
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	1.1	44	44	43	43	43
76	Belarus	9.5	3.8	4.8	9.4	12.1	3.3	43	33	30	28	35

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## Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 1 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

# WWL 2023 Situation in brief / Colombia

## Brief country details

Colombia: Population (UN estimate for 2022)	Christians	Chr%
51,513,000	49,002,000	95.1

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

## Map of country



Colombia: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	71	22
WWL 2022	68	30
WWL 2021	67	30
WWL 2020	62	41
WWL 2019	58	47

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Colombia: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Organized corruption and crime	Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, Organized crime cartels or networks, Government officials
Clan oppression	Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, One's own (extended) family, Government officials, Violent religious groups, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Secular intolerance	Government officials, Ideological pressure groups

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

## Brief description of the persecution situation

In the run-up to the presidential elections in May and June 2022, church leaders were threatened, harassed, extorted and even murdered as a result of the increased territorial control and violence perpetrated by non-state actors (such as guerrillas and other criminal groups) especially in rural and other neglected areas. In most cases, this violence was the direct result of Christians being involved in such activities as:

- Speaking publicly about the ongoing corruption and violence;
- Working for the defense of human and environmental rights;
- Working among youth;
- Assisting in the process to restore of peace;
- Opposing criminal activities in sermons;
- Any kind of action defying the de facto authority of local criminal groups or perceived as endangering their illegal activities.

In indigenous communities, there is significant opposition towards Christian missionaries and indigenous converts, who, as a result, face imprisonment, physical abuse, denial of basic rights, and are often hindered from making use of their ancestral territory, among other forms of punishment.

In addition, as a result of growing radical secularism, there is increasing intolerance towards Christian views in the public sphere, especially about issues concerning life, family, marriage and religious liberty. Christians speaking in public about their beliefs are sometimes targeted for sup-

posedly being discriminatory. For this reason, some of them choose to self-censor in order to avoid becoming targets.

## Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Colombia 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)

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

- Christians are targeted by militias for expressing their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian children are harassed because of their parents' faith (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christians face restrictions in employment in the public sector and experience discrimination in the private sector (ICCPR Arts. 25 and 26, and ICESCR Art. 6)
- Christians face harassment and violence if they discuss their faith or engage in proselytization (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)

## Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- **October 2021, Norte de Santander:** According to internal sources, a female Christian was assassinated by members of the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia group (AGC). She was leading a missionary movement based in Puerto Santander and had been travelling to various areas. She was targeted for being an 'informer', working for other criminal groups.
- **February 2022 - Buenaventura:** Bishop Rubén Darío Jaramillo denounced the activities of armed groups in the Buenaventura region and received several [death threats](#). As a result, he cannot enter parts of the Buenaventura port area (Agenzia Fides, 8 February 2022).
- **June 2022 - Cauca:** According to in-country sources, 5 indigenous Christians were beaten with whips and detained for several hours by the indigenous authorities in Cauca in jail cells. They were accused of spreading Christian teaching which contradicted the traditional school curriculum approved by the indigenous community. They were forced to sign a document stating their acceptance of the educational model imposed by the community.
- **September 2022 - Bogota:** As part of the protests surrounding the Global Day of Action for a Legal and Safe Abortion, a group of women made an [attempt to burn down](#) the door of the Catedral Primada de Bogotá (RCN Radio, 28 September 2022).



## Specific examples of positive developments

- Within the framework of the Comprehensive Public Policy on Religious Freedom and Worship, the Ministry of the Interior has created the [Bank for Interreligious Initiatives](#) in agreement with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which is aimed at providing financial support for social programs proposed and carried out by religious groups (CEC, 4 May 2022).
- In a follow-up to the "[Religious Freedom Law](#) 2200" of 2022, government departments are being given the responsibility to formulate, adopt and implement public policies that guarantee the exercise of freedom of conscience and religious freedom, support interreligious dialogue, and show recognition for the social contribution of faith-based groups (Diario Oficial, 8 February 2022).

## External Links - Situation in brief

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: death threats - [http://www.fides.org/en/news/71605-AMERICA\\_COLOMBIA\\_Bishop\\_of\\_Buenaventura\\_receives\\_death\\_threats\\_Today\\_he\\_is\\_the\\_victim](http://www.fides.org/en/news/71605-AMERICA_COLOMBIA_Bishop_of_Buenaventura_receives_death_threats_Today_he_is_the_victim)
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: attempt to burn down - <https://www.rcnradio.com/bogota/video-mujeres-que-protestan-a-favor-del-aborto-trataron-quemar-la-catedral-primada>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Bank for Interreligious Initiatives - <https://www.cec.org.co/sistema-informativo/departamentos/c%C3%B3mo-financiar-proyectos-en-el-banco-de-iniciativas>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Religious Freedom Law - <http://ojs.uc.cl/index.php/bjur/article/view/49617/39347>

# WWL 2023: Keys to understanding / Colombia

## Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2021/22 country report – covering 154 countries	AI country report 2021/22 (pp.130-135)	<a href="https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf">https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf</a>	10 June 2022
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	<a href="https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19390026">https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19390026</a>	10 June 2022
Bertelsmann Transformation Index country report 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI report 2022	<a href="https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/COL">https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/COL</a>	10 June 2022
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	<a href="https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/colombia/">https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/colombia/</a>	10 June 2022
Crisis24 country report (Garda World) – covering 193 countries	Crisis24 country report	<a href="https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/colombia">https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/colombia</a>	10 June 2022
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2021 – covering 167 countries	EIU 2021 (p.49/50)	<a href="https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf">https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf</a>	10 June 2022
FFP's Fragile States Index 2022 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2022	<a href="https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/">https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/</a>	10 June 2022
Freedom House's 2022 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Colombia is not included	Democracy Index 2022	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores</a>	
Freedom House's 2022 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2022	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/colombia/freedom-world/2022">https://freedomhouse.org/country/colombia/freedom-world/2022</a>	10 June 2022
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2022 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2022	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/colombia/freedom-net/2022">https://freedomhouse.org/country/colombia/freedom-net/2022</a>	2 January 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2022 (country chapter) – covering 100+ countries	HRW 2022 country chapter	<a href="https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/colombia">https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/colombia</a>	10 June 2022
Internet World Stats 2022	IWS 2022	<a href="https://www.internetworldstats.com/south.htm#co">https://www.internetworldstats.com/south.htm#co</a>	10 June 2022
RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2022	<a href="https://rsf.org/en/colombia">https://rsf.org/en/colombia</a>	10 June 2022
Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2021	<a href="https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/col">https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/col</a>	10 June 2022
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators (country profile) – covering 189 countries	HDI profile	<a href="https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/COL">https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/COL</a>	10 June 2022
US State Department's 2021 International Religious Freedom (country profile)	IRFR 2021	<a href="https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/colombia/">https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/colombia/</a>	10 June 2022
USCIRF 2022 country reports – covering 15 CPC / 12 SWL, Colombia not included	USCIRF 2022	<a href="https://www.uscifr.gov/countries">https://www.uscifr.gov/countries</a>	
World Bank country overview – covering 178 countries	World Bank overview 2022	<a href="https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/colombia/overview#1">https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/colombia/overview#1</a>	10 June 2022
World Bank country profile data – covering 222 countries	World Bank profile (2020 data)	<a href="https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&amp;id=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=COL">https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&amp;id=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=COL</a>	10 June 2022
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 – covering 147 countries (divided per region)	Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 (pp.16-17)	<a href="https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/e408a7e21ba62d843bdd90dc37e61b57-0500032021/related/mpo-lac.pdf">https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/e408a7e21ba62d843bdd90dc37e61b57-0500032021/related/mpo-lac.pdf</a>	10 June 2022

## Recent history

Colombia became independent from Spain after a period of struggle in the years 1810-1819. The Santa Fe Independence Act was signed in 1810 and there followed six battles in the war of independence. The most famous was Battle of Boyacá fought on 7 August 1819, won by the revolutionary forces under Simón Bolívar.

In 2018, Iván Duque Márquez (of the Democratic Center Party) became the youngest-ever president of Colombia (he was born in 1976). In August 2022, he handed over to his successor, Gustavo Petro, a former M-19 guerilla fighter, who won the [presidential election](#) in June 2022 (The Guardian, 20 June 2022) – see below.

Widespread dissatisfaction with President Iván Duque's administration increased greatly. Towards the end of 2019, nationwide [demonstrations](#) took place which were led by students, indigenous leaders and unions. The protests focused on political, social, economic and security issues (The Guardian, 4 December 2019). During the demonstrations that continued into 2020,

the protestors were joined by [illegal armed groups](#). The commander of the ELN's Western War Front, confirmed in a video posted on social media networks, that ELN teams were active in the vandalism occurring during the September protests (La Opinion, 24 September 2020).

The compulsory isolation measures which were introduced to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus also had a negative impact on the economy and in other areas. In April 2021, [nationwide demonstrations](#) took place once again, driven first by the rejection of a tax reform proposal and continued later in response to the government's violent action against protesters (New York Times, 27 May 2021). Despite [dialogue](#) taking place between the government and Colombia's National Strike Committee (CNP), made up mainly of unions, the talks were abandoned when no concrete agreements seemed possible (La Prensa Latina, 6 June 2021).

Ivan Duque's main objective as president was to enforce security. The government partially complied with the [peace accords](#), renaming them "[Peace with Legality](#)" (Reincorporacion, January 2022 ), but it was unable to contain the increasing violence caused by guerrilla and paramilitary groups and criminal gangs (See below: *Security situation*).

The first round of [elections](#) to choose the president of Colombia for the period 2022-2026 were held on 29 May 2022. The vote was inconclusive and so a second round between Gustavo Petro, the candidate of the Historical Pact, a coalition of leftist parties, and Rodolfo Hernández, leader of the political movement League of Governors Anticorruption had to take place (CNN, 30 May 2022). In the second round, held on 19 June 2022, the [winner](#) was Gustavo Petro (CNN Español, 19 June 2022).

Contact with the Andean Community, the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Pacific Alliance has been strengthened. In April 2020, Colombia officially became the [37th member](#) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 28 April 2020). Colombia also [joined](#) other Latin American countries in the Forum for the Progress of South America (ProSur) in supporting initiatives for the adoption of a global response to pandemics (Andina, 26 May 2020).

In August 2022, the Gustavo Petro government [withdrew](#) from the Geneva Consensus Declaration, in which a group of approximately thirty nations express opposition to abortion. The reason for the withdrawal, according to the Colombian Foreign Ministry, was that the country now had a legal framework [allowing](#) the practice of abortion legally and safely (Semana, 22 August 2022).

## Political and legal landscape

A survey carried out by Invarmer indicated that [67%](#) of the 2,000 respondents expressed disagreement with President Duque's policies in the last months before the end of his term in office (El Colombiano, 19 May 2022). Various organizations have reported that Duque is leaving a [legacy](#) of high levels of political violence, armed conflict, rampant corruption, political patronage, structural poverty in rural areas, serious unemployment rates, etc. (The Washington Post, 17 May 2022).

Gustavo Petro, presidential candidate for the Historical Pact, [won](#) the elections in the second round with more than 50% of the vote (The Guardian, 20 June 2022). It is the first time Colombia

has a 'leftist' president. In addition, Francia Márquez, a defender of human and environmental rights is the first Afro-Colombian woman to be elected as vice president. Gustavo Petro's 54 page [government plan](#) states that it will protect religious and religious diversity, and will guarantee all citizens the conditions for the exercise of equality and freedom of worship according to their religious and spiritual options (Government Plan 2022-2026, undated). Likewise, it indicates that all public policy relating to equality and religious freedom will be harmonized with the Constitution and the law. The elected president took office on 7 August 2022. By October 2022, 46% of those who responded to a survey carried out by Invamer indicated that they [approved](#) of the administration of Gustavo Petro (Infobae, 19 October 2022).

Within the first 100 days of government, Gustavo Petro pushed through some important changes:

- A [tax reform](#) seeking to raise around 4 million dollars. Among the changes was a tax on hydrocarbons and the increase in taxes on financial companies, the increase for those with high incomes and the tax on some ultra-processed foods and sugary drinks (BBC News, 4 November 2022).
- The [reopening](#) of trade and diplomatic relations with neighboring Venezuela (El País, 26 September 2022).
- A proposal for [electoral reform](#) aiming to regulate the financing of electoral campaigns and modify some conditions for applicants. (Infobae, 13 September 2022). Some sectors consider that the proposed changes seek to facilitate the conditions for the political forces of Gustavo Petro to gain ground in the 2024 regional elections.

Towards the end of Ivan Duque's mandate, the implementation of peace agreements and the fight against corruption were the most dominant issues for the government. The peace process is slower than expected; however, in the period 1 April - 30 June 2022, the Kroc Institute recorded the following [Implementation Status of the 578 Stipulations](#) of the Implementation of the Final Accord (Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies/Keough School of Global Affairs, 2022):

- "The Kroc Institute recorded a three-percentage point decrease in non-initiated stipulations (from 16% to 13%). This change is related to the approval in April of Resolution 019, which regulates the establishment of the Committee to Monitor the Implementation of the Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Recurrence Commission's (CEV's) Recommendations. Additionally, there was a one-percentage point increase in intermediate-level stipulations (from 26% to 27%) caused by the release of the CEV's final report in June 2022."

Earlier in November 2021, the [effective status](#) of the levels of implementation of the 578 provisions showed that 30% of the provisions were complete, 19% were at an intermediate stage of implementation, 37% were still at an initial stage and 15% had not yet commenced (Matriz de Acuerdos de Paz Iniciativa Barómetro & Instituto Kroc de Estudios Internacionales, 31 May 2022).

In Congress, all ex-guerrillas are grouped together in the political party called "Comunes". However, their presence in Congress is currently still a result of the Peace Agreement and not through any form of voting. From 2026 onwards, they will need to [achieve](#) the necessary popular support to remain in Congress (El Tiempo, 1 October 2021). Due to the fact that the party did not receive a significant number of votes in the last congressional and local elections, the party is going through a crisis and it [may split in the future](#) (Caracol, 29 September 2021).

Military service is [mandatory](#) for men in Colombia for a period of 18-24 months (World Population Review, 2022). There are some [exemptions](#), such as physically or cognitively impaired people or some indigenous groups (Refworld, August 2022). Other groups such as religious leaders are also exempt in peace time.

Men and women have equal rights in relation to marriage, divorce and guardianship of children ([OECD, 2019](#)). Legislation is insufficient concerning child marriage however, permitting marriage of children over 14 with parental approval (Civil Code 1974). 23% of girls are married by 18 and according to [Girls Not Brides](#) (accessed 23 August 2022), these unions are more prevalent among indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. As part of the 2016 peace agreement between the government and FARC, gender and women's rights provisions were included in the peace deal. Progress in implementing these provisions has, however, been slow and women continue to face high levels of insecurity and violence; female human rights defenders are particularly vulnerable to attack ([HRW, February 2021](#)).

## Religious landscape

Colombia: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	49,002,000	95.1
Muslim	27,700	0.1
Hindu	12,400	0.0
Buddhist	2,200	0.0
Ethno-religionist	320,000	0.6
Jewish	5,000	0.0
Bahai	82,600	0.2
Atheist	141,000	0.3
Agnostic	1,388,000	2.7
Other	532,300	1.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

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

The [1991 Constitution](#) guarantees freedom of religion and states that every person enjoys the right to profess their own belief individually or collectively (Article 19). There is no official state religion; all religious denominations are equal by law; the state does however maintain a concordat with the Holy See. The Roman Catholic Church continues to enjoy privileged status compared to other religious denominations. The authorities maintain an [open dialogue](#) with representatives of the Catholic Church to discuss issues such as the defense of the Concordat Law, the protection of the right to religious and worship freedom, conscientious objection in various contexts, as well as the participation of the Catholic Church in public policy on Religious Freedom and Worship (Vatican News, 27 April 2022).

In 1998, the Colombian authorities also signed an agreement (entitled Decree 354) with 13 non-Catholic Christian groups (El Heraldo, 2 August 2019). Among other things, this decree gives legally binding recognition of marriages and the guarantee that property used for worship cannot be seized by the state.

Churches that do not join those covered by [Decree 354](#) may choose to request recognition of their legal status and be registered in the Public Registry of the Ministry of Interior. This allows them to collect funds, receive donations, establish religious education institutions, perform religious services (excluding legally registered marriages) and directly enter into agreements with public or private entities, foundations, national and/or international organizations for the development of social and educational projects. However, according to the US State Department (IRFR 2021) unregistered entities can carry out religious activities without penalty but may not collect financial support or receive non-monetary private donations. In the midst of the latest tax reform, an attempt was made to make churches pay [20% income tax](#) when they carry out activities not related to worship, but the inclusion of this article failed (El Comercio, 10 November 2022).

Since the [signing of the Final Agreement](#) in September/November 2016 (The Guardian, 24 November 2016), religious communities (including Christians) have been considered valid social actors in the promotion of [dialogue](#) (Aciprensa, 6 May 2022) and peace. They have functioned as active participants in some departmental and national public policies, although this has also caused criticism from secularists and made them targets for acts of aggression. In the latest presidential elections, the Catholic Church [called](#) for citizens to vote in a responsible manner and requested that all necessary measures be taken to mitigate the influence of armed groups (CEC, 16 June 2022). Church leaders also dared to [make known](#) their knowledge of alliances between illegal armed groups and certain sectors of the government army, as well as illegal activity occurring in various departments in the country. This earned them threats not only from criminal groups but also from members of the armed forces (Religión Digital, 24 February 2022).

In general, the state has continued to recognize the religious sector as being an important element in establishing peace in the country and has called for the active participation of churches and faith-based organizations in different scenarios. However, despite public recognition of the religious sector, there still exists a general rejection of public religious expression, especially if these come from public officials, including high profile public representatives. There was a move in 2022, rejected by the Supreme Court, to have a [cross removed](#) from the Full Chamber of the Constitutional Court "because its presence would violate

the principles of secularism, human dignity, equality and due process" by demonstrating state bias towards Christian faith (OJS, 30 April, 2022). The courts have also tried to ban expressions of personal faith made by local government staff on social media networks, in the belief this is necessary for adhering to the secular principle of Church-State separation.

In the name of Church-State separation, pressure groups continued to [criticize faith-based statements](#) made by Christian leaders on the issues of abortion, family, marriage and religious liberty (CEC, 12 May 2022). These groups commonly attack verbally, [vandalize](#) churches (El País, 29 September 2022) and disrupt church services. In such matters, [police inaction](#) is usual (Religion Digital, 29 September 2022). In the WWL 2023 reporting period, discrimination by the Mayoress of Bogotá towards faith communities also became evident when she [allocated no resources](#) for the religious festival that has been held every year for ten years, within the framework of the Bogotá Summer Festival. In contrast, other groups received resources as usual from the mayor's office (Infobae, 13 July 2022).

In the WWL 2023 reporting period, Christians were actively involved in the electoral process. As mentioned above, church leaders [called](#) for a 'responsible' vote, condemned the violence threatening the presidential candidates and asked that the candidates focus their proposals on how the situation in Colombia can be improved (Vatican News, 18 June 2022). The elected candidate, Gustavo Petro, [assured](#) the population that the churches will keep their doors open and in total freedom without any additional taxation (Infobae, 15 June 2022). He pledged to work to promote religious freedom and equality at all levels of government and in all corners of the country.

The Roman Catholic Church has also sought to promote dialogue with armed groups in an attempt to end the continuing violence and insecurity. As part of the reactivation of negotiations between the ELN and the national government, the Episcopal Conference of Colombia has been involved as a [permanent](#) member in the process (CEC, 2 December 2022).

Churches have continued to carry out [evangelistic activities](#) (Aciprensa, 11 August 2022) and have also played an active role in the education of young people, helping prevent them from enlisting in the various criminal/guerrilla groups in the country. Such activity often places church leaders involved in politics and social activism in danger. Especially in areas co-opted by guerrillas and other criminal groups, there were reports of [death threats](#), for instance, against a bishop for denouncing the activities of armed actors in Buenaventura (Aciprensa, 8 February 2022). As a result, he cannot enter some parts of the diocese he is responsible for. Similarly, church and social leaders who have spoken publicly about the apparent collusion between the so-called Clan del Golfo and the security forces (in areas of the country such as Chocó and Antioquia) have been put under [pressure](#) by some members of the army (Prensa Celam, 15 February 2022).

Christian leaders who [denounce](#) corrupt public officials, run the risk of being silenced (La Opinion, 28 December 2021). There was, for instance, a [defamation campaign](#) made against the national coordinator of the NGO Interecclesial Commission for Justice and Peace (CIJP). This human rights organization exposes cases of human rights violations committed by security forces and paramilitary groups in Colombia's conflict regions (OMCT, 22 April 2022). Other measures for silencing and putting under pressure are forced displacement, mobility limitations,

bans on holding church services and church burglary. Churches have often had to [change](#) the times of their church services, since local gangs often set curfews, dictating when people are allowed to be out on the streets (Catholic News Agency, 02 September 2022). (See below: *Security situation*).

### **A special note about 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' in indigenous communities**

Within indigenous communities, the religious factor is an important component of their culture and identity and shapes their relationships with other people and even natural resources. As in many indigenous communities in Latin America, the religious practices are mostly related to syncretistic practices adapted from Roman Catholic rites. In some cases, they identify themselves as Catholics and indigenous leaders tend to be more receptive to the presence of Roman Catholic members than with Christians from other denominations. However, any type of preaching or religious activity requires permission from the leaders. Anything going against the customs of the ethnic group will be punished. Due to the general acceptance of Catholic traditions inside indigenous communities, most 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' are of Protestant or Evangelical origin.

In indigenous communities, Christians face opposition where they reject the religious practices and customs of the ethnic group to which they belong, especially if they are related with witchcraft rites. This has led to indigenous leaders often seeing Christian influences from outside as a destabilizing element. Since ethnic leaders are those who administer justice in their territories, religious freedom of indigenous people is not duly guaranteed by local (state) authorities where it concerns a religion differing from the community one. Therefore - and only with regard to indigenous people - those adhering to 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' refer in this country dossier to those Christians who refuse to follow the ancestral or traditional beliefs of the ethnic group to which they belong because it contradicts their faith. Thus, when syncretistic religious customs related to Roman Catholic rites (or ancestral religious customs that worship nature) are practiced in the indigenous community, they refuse to participate and consequently face hostility and rejection. (See below: *Clan oppression*.)

## **Economic landscape**

According to UNDP's HDI profile:

- **Gross national income per capita (2021):** 14,384
- **GNI per capita (2021):** 10,281 for women; 18,599 for men
- **Inequality in income (2021):** 37.7%
- **Population vulnerable to multidimensional poverty** is 6.2%

According to the World Bank country overview:

- "Colombia's economy has recovered vibrantly from the COVID-19 crisis supported by a bout of consumption that had been repressed during the pandemic. GDP rebounded 10.7 percent in 2021 and it is projected to grow 7.1 percent in 2022. This exceptional dynamic has brought the economy to operate above its potential and, growth is projected to slow gradually to 2.8 percent by 2025."



- "Strong domestic demand, the depreciation of the Colombian peso, indexation of wages and regulated prices, and price pressures from abroad have pushed inflation to over 10 percent. In response, the Central Bank increased the monetary policy rate to 10 percent at end-September."
- "With some 1.4 million people exiting poverty in 2021, the national poverty rate has dropped to 39.3 percent, still above pre-pandemic levels. The middle class has also rebounded, and income inequality has declined. Nonetheless, 2.1 million of those who had fallen into poverty in 2020 are estimated to have remained poor in 2021. Colombia remains one of the most unequal countries in the world."

According to World Bank's [Global economic outlook \(June 2022\)](#), growth will slow sharply as the post-pandemic recovery leads to policy tightening.

#### ***Unemployment and Economic growth:***

- According to the Unemployment Rates Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the [unemployment rate](#) fell from 12.5% to 11.3 (OECD, 10 November 2022).
- According to the National Administrative Department of Statistics, in the third quarter of 2022, the Gross Domestic Product, in its original series, [grew](#) 7.0% compared to the same period in 2021 (DANE, 15 November 2022). By October 2022, the unemployment rate of the national total was 9.7%. In October 2022, compared to the same period in 2021, the level of the employed population [increased](#) by close to 1.5 million people. (Camara de Comercio de Bogota, December 2022).
- The Colombia report carried out by the Circle of Latin American Studies-CESLA shows that, after the 2020 crisis, President Duque's administration successfully brought the economy to a level of [high growth capacity](#). The sectors of the economy that grew the most in the first half of 2022 were entertainment, commerce, manufacturing, communications, and financial services. However, even if the economy recovers, the labor market takes time to respond positively. For the month of August 2022 the level of unemployment is already close to the level it was in the month before the pandemic.
- Inflation rose above 10% in July 2022, for the first time in 22 years. Decisions on economic matters in the first months of the national administration have generated deep mistrust and have started a process of capital flight that has visibly increased the exchange rate. The main sign of nervousness in the markets is the increase in the price of the dollar, which exceeded 5,000 Colombian pesos in October 2022. In January 2022, the dollar price was 3,981 pesos (CESLA, October 2022).

In November 2022, the tax reform proposed by Gustavo Petro was approved. According to the president, the objective of this reform involves reducing tax benefits for the highest earners and income redistribution to the most vulnerable. The reform basically makes those with more income pay [more taxes](#) (DIAN, November 2022). Other [main changes](#) were (CNN 4 November 2022):

- Prison sentences for evaders of between 4 and 9 years;
- A tax on single-use plastics was approved for the sale and import of products;
- A tax on sugary drinks;

- The creation of an income surcharge for oil companies;
- A proposed tax on certain church activities was scrapped.

Like everyone else in the country, Christians also suffered from the economic setbacks caused by the COVID-19 crisis. In addition, in some rural areas, Christian families face mobility restrictions imposed by criminal groups, which limit their access to their crops and other livelihood activities such as fishing. Even though fraught with challenges and danger, church humanitarian assistance to [vulnerable sectors](#) of the population has been possible (Cope, 17 May 2022). This has helped ease the strain on government resources in some areas caused by the COVID-19 crisis. It is also important to mention that one of the forms of collaboration between the church and the economy is the generation of jobs. According to the National Department of Statistics, 260,000 [formal jobs](#) have been generated by more than 5,000 religious organizations that have a presence in the country. Work among the elderly is a particular focus (Bluradio, 4 April 2022).

In general, women remain the most economically vulnerable in Colombia with unemployment rates almost 2 times higher than that of men (World Bank data profile). Over the past decades, significant improvements have been made in relation to education opportunities for girls, such that there is now gender parity and perhaps, an even slight margin in favor of women ([Georgetown, 2021, p. 362](#)). Whilst women continue to have fewer work opportunities, the number of women in the workforce is also on the rise (World Bank data profile). However, it re-

mains challenging for women to attain high profile positions, such as governmental posts; candidates are also vulnerable to threats and attacks ([UN Women, 2021](#)). Despite the challenges, recent elections saw record numbers of female candidates and women elected to Congress; this is a sign that demands for higher female representation in politics are beginning to be heeded ([UN Press Release, 12 April 2022](#)). Men also face economic challenges as the primary financial providers and are often targeted for extortion by criminal groups and fines.

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the CIA Factbook:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Mestizo and White 87.6%, Afro-Colombian (includes Mulatto, Raizal, and Palenquero) 6.8%, Amerindian 4.3%, unspecified 1.4% (2018 est.).
- **Main language:** Spanish (official) and Amerindian language.
- **Urban population:** 82.4% of the total population (2022)
- **Literacy rate:** 95.6% .
- **Population below poverty line:** 35.7% (2019 est.).

According to the World Bank data profile:

- **Education:** The school enrollment for pre-primary (2020) is 86%; for primary (2020) is 113% and for secondary (2020) is 102%. The duration of compulsory education is 12 years (2020).
- **School Gender Parity Index (GPI) (2020):** 1.01. This refers to the ratio of girls to boys enrolled at primary and secondary levels in public and private schools.
- **Unemployment:** 14.3% (2021) Modeled ILO estimate.

- **IDPs/Refugees:** 115, 792 (2021). Migration Colombia has approved - as of June 30 - around 1.1 million Temporary Protection Permits (PPT) to Venezuelans allowing them access to rights and services (UNHCR, March-June 2022).

According to the UNDP's HDI profile:

- **HDI score and ranking:** Colombia's HDI value for 2019 is 0.752, which put the country in the 'high' human development category, ranking 82 out of 189 countries and territories.
- **Life expectancy (2021):** 76.4 female and 69.4 male.
- **Gender inequality (2021):** Colombia has a 2019 Gender Inequality Index value of 0.424, ranking it 102 out of 162 countries. The labor force participation rate for women is 52.2%, compared to 78.0% for men.

According to the most recent National Population and [Housing Census](#) published in 2018 by the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE, 30 June 2018), 4.4% of the Colombian population regard themselves as indigenous: 1,905,617 citizens (distributed in 115 native indigenous people distributed over a large part of the national territory), a rise of 1% compared to the 2005 Census. The State recognizes the autonomy and self-determination of indigenous groups, which means that the indigenous populations establish and regulate their norms of coexistence. Hence, ethnic leaders attempt to impose a lifestyle regulated by their ancestral customs and act as the only authority in the area.

The COVID-19 crisis increased the vulnerability of the poorest sections of society. Faced with unemployment, it was the poorest communities and the informal sector which suffered most severely. The most vulnerable sectors, especially the rural and indigenous sectors, do not have minimum public services and social infrastructure. During the 2021 wave of protests, the [most affected areas](#) also ended up being the most vulnerable areas since roadblocks caused serious problems in the supply of food and medicine (Connectas, July 2021). State support is often minimal; in addition, endemic corruption between criminal groups and local authorities is so established that it adds to the continuity of multidimensional poverty. Also, it often adds to a greater presence of illegal and armed groups. In most cases, violence is most acute in rural areas. During the year 2021, the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF) provided care for 121 minors who had been [recruited](#) by illegal armed groups (RCN Radio, 11 October 2021).

## Killings

Cases of police abuse also continue to be a concern. The Office of the [United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (UNHCHR) pointed out that during 2021, they received 100 allegations of arbitrary deprivation of life, of which it verified 54 cases, 17 are in the process of verification and 29 were inconclusive. In 44 of the verified cases, members of the national police force were allegedly responsible; in 5 cases, it was members of the armed forces; and in two cases, it was off-duty officials belonging to the Technical Investigation Corps of the Prosecutor's Office. Three cases occurred during joint-operations between the armed forces and the national police force (HCHR, 3 March 2022). The United Nations has also reiterated its [concern](#) regarding the persistent threats, attacks and killings targeting community and social leaders that expose the concerns raised by business projects in the country (UN, 4 August 2022). For its part, the Colombian Ombudsman's Office reported [199 murders](#) of social leaders in the eleven month

period of 1 January - 30 November 2022, which is the highest number since 2016 (Swiss Info, 7 December 2022).

### **Restricted access to basic goods and services**

According to a report by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - OCHA, from January to March 2022, the humanitarian impact caused by armed violence greatly affected the [civilian population](#) (OCHA, 4 April 2022). The report highlights the situation of confinement suffered by more than 170 communities in Chocó, where 48,300 people live, the majority of whom are indigenous or Afro-Colombian, where not only access to basic goods and services and the effective enjoyment of rights was restricted by the presence of non-state armed groups, life-threatening anti-personnel mines (MAP) and unexploded ordnance (MSE). The departments of Chocó, Valle del Cauca, Antioquia and Arauca face triple-impact emergencies with high levels of displacement, confinement and natural disasters. Similarly, the OCHA reported that 148,013 people were victims of forced displacement in 2021-2022.

Considering the aforementioned, a group of social organizations, NGOs, ethnic groups, student movements, academics, among others, have declared a [humanitarian and human rights emergency](#) throughout the country (Justicia y Paz Colombia, 27 April 2022). In this scenario, Christian communities and church leaders are active in many of the poorer sectors of society, for instance, in education and in the provision of basic goods for the neediest families. The Catholic bishops of Colombia appealed for solidarity to combat the various crises throughout the country. For instance, the Church asked the governments of Colombia and Venezuela to resume binational relations in order to [respond](#) effectively to the challenges that care for migrants (Aciprensa, 25 May 2022). In the same way, Christian networks and organizations constantly [denounce](#) the factors triggering social crisis in various communities in the country (Manos Unidas, 17 May 2022). The [report](#) of the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition also highlights the mediation capacities of church organizations - among others - in the reconstruction of the social fabric, and the promotion of dialogue between different sectors of society. Among the commission's recommendations was a call is made to the country's churches and communities of faith to continue working for a culture of peace (Comisión de la Verdad, June 2022). This - along with other activities assisting the neediest - has put many Christians at particular risk, as discussed below (in: *Security situation*).

Colombia operates according to patriarchal norms, whereby men are the primary financial providers and women assume a greater share of domestic chores. A 2015 study on social acceptance of violence against women reveals that social attitudes concerning gender are changing; in 2014, 31% of respondents believed that men should be the head of the household, compared to 45% in 2009 ([Proyectamos](#) Colombia, 2015). There are currently [no](#) legal restrictions against female headship (World Bank, Snapshot: Woman, Business and the Law 2021). Domestic violence nonetheless remains widespread in Colombia, and the rate of femicides reportedly increased during the COVID-19 lockdowns ([Al-Jazeera, 20 October 2020](#); [Statista, June 2022](#)). In addition, about 45% of [female domestic workers](#) lost their jobs as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, according to the Georgetown Women, Peace and Security Index report (GIWPS, 2022, p. 35).

## Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2022):

- **Internet usage:** 83.2% penetration - survey date: June 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 83.2% penetration – survey date: June 2022

According to the World Bank country profile:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions (2020):** 133 per 100 people

Data by [Statista](#) (2021) reveals that men and women use social media at an equal rate. Mobile internet usage is also very similar, with 52% of men accessing the Internet through a mobile device, versus 48% of women (Statista, 2019). This indicates that Christian men and women have a similar level of access to digital Christian resources and community. According to Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (GIWPS), about [93.8%](#) of women in Colombia have access to a mobile phone (GIWPS, 2021, p. 77).

According to Freedom on the Net 2022:

- The key Internet controls reported were the blocking of political, social or religious content, and the arrest and imprisonment of bloggers for posting political or social content. Some bloggers were physically attacked (including being killed in custody). Other critics and human right organizations experienced digital attacks.

According to Reporters Without Borders (World Press Freedom 2022):

- Colombia continues to be one of the western hemisphere's most dangerous countries for journalists. There has been an increasing number of attacks against journalists by protesters during social mobilizations, a consequence of ideological polarization, while trust in the media continues to decline. Coverage of environmental issues such as mining and deforestation expose journalists to violence, as do coverage of topics related to armed conflicts, social conflict around land claims, community organization, or the vindication of rights to ethnic communities and aspects related to a peace agreement. Themes related to corruption and alliances between politicians, armed groups and private companies, are also particularly sensitive for the safety of journalists.

According to the [Ministry of Information Technologies and Communications](#), in the second quarter of 2022, total fixed Internet accesses in Colombia reached 8.37 million, that is, close to 70,000 new accesses than those registered in the same quarter of the immediately previous year, when a figure of 8.30 million was reached. (MinTIC, October 2022).

During the COVID-19 crisis, Christian groups used online media and technology to continue evangelizing. The restrictions imposed on mobility and gathering for worship forced many church leaders and their congregations to become familiar with digital communication platforms in order to remain in contact. In the case of the Catholic Church, there is a special [platform](#) for the chaplaincy work of the Military Bishopric of Colombia (CEC, December 2022), there have been special online [events](#) such as the Week of the Digital Evangelizer (Religion en Libertad, 5

May 2022), and there are even, in cooperation with certain universities, [virtual communication courses](#) being offered with a focus on evangelization (Radio María, 16 April 2021). The risk of both virtual platforms and events open to the public, is that participants are frequently exposed to hostility from ideological pressure groups.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that in rural areas, such as Nudo de Paramillo and Catatumbo, armed groups require Christians to disclose all contacts, messages and other information stored on their mobile phones. This monitoring can put others and the Christians themselves at risk.

## Security situation

According to the [United Nations Verification Mission](#) in Colombia (UN Mission in Colombia, 27 September 2022, #58):

- Since the signing of the Final Agreement in September/November 2016, "the Mission has registered the killing of 342 former combatants (11 women, 48 Afro-Colombian persons and 28 indigenous persons). There have been 105 victims of attempted homicide (8 women), and 27 former combatants are deemed as missing (all men). Over 80 per cent of the killings are concentrated in Cauca, Nariño, Antioquia, Caquetá, Meta, Putumayo, Norte de Santander, Valle del Cauca and Chocó, highlighting the urgency of targeted actions in these regions, which are among those prioritized by the new administration".

Indepaz reported that, in 2022 alone, 42 signatories of the Peace Agreement (all ex-combatants) had been [murdered](#) (Indepaz, last accessed 2 January 2023). The assassination of leaders and ex-combatants has hindered the implementation of the Final Agreement and affected the general perception of its practicality. Likewise, the murder of leaders of the National Program for the Substitution of Crops for Illicit Use has continued. Levels of fear in many communities are high due to the presence of members of the ELN, FARC and other criminal groups (See below). In this context, the legal framework and the policies to fight corruption are weak. Government security forces are also being [accused](#) of collaborating with or tolerating the activities of the National Liberation Army (Semana, 18 September 2021).

According to the [United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights \(UNHCHR\)](#), violence committed by non-state armed groups and criminal organizations affects individual and collective life and disproportionately impacts indigenous peoples, people of African descent and rural communities (Reliefweb, 8 March 2022). As well as committing massacres, forced displacements and imposing restrictions on mobility, these groups kill social leaders, threaten those who disregard their demands, control communications in the community, limit relationships with third parties, restrict and control productive activities including planting, harvesting, fishing and marketing of products, and do not recognize ethnic authorities. Such actions negatively affect the communities' food security and undermine their political and economic autonomy. In addition, these actions strengthen the development and exploitation of illicit economies and territorial control by non-state armed groups.

According to United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, since September 2022, there has been a decrease in the monthly trend in the number of killings due to high-impact humanitarian emergencies such as high levels of displacement and lockdowns in

the country; especially in departments such as Guaviare, Antioquia and Valle del Cauca, which have seen a reduction compared to 2021. However, individual and collective threats, and clashes between non-state armed groups (main causes of these emergencies) remain a [constant trend](#), especially in departments where there is the presence of more than one armed group such as Arauca, Chocó, Putumayo, Norte de Santander, Nariño, Meta and Cauca, for which the effects on vulnerable groups continue due to the imposition of various forms of territorial control in the face of the dispute over these territories (OCHA, November 2022). The [Institute of Studies for Development and Peace](#) has recorded that from January to December 2022, around 91 massacres with 289 victims have been identified (Indepaz, December 2022).

In some instances, violence has been reported as a result of abuses by the national police and armed forces. It is noteworthy that the national police are not under the command of the Ministry of the Interior or Justice, but under the Ministry of Defense, a legacy of the country's long internal armed conflict. Calls for reform have often proposed that the police force be moved out of the Defense Ministry to ensure strict civil scrutiny and ensure that civilian courts handle serious abuse cases. The main perpetrators of violence are organized armed groups, namely the ELN, the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC), FARC units that did not accept the peace process and FARC members who have decided to return to fight the government. In addition to these groups, there are criminal groups referred to as "Organized Armed Groups" (GAO - formerly known as BACRIM). The variety of groups, some having connections with Mexican cartels, means there is a continual struggle for gaining territory and power. In this context, as reported by [Indepaz](#), there are 22 narco-paramilitary structures in the country, 30 post-FARC structures and 8 ELN fronts (Indepaz, September 2021). Not to mention, the 2005 (smaller) [criminal gangs](#) that operate in the main urban centers of the country (El Colombiano, 13 June 2022). There are so-called 'invisible borders' demarcated by armed groups, especially in the Pacific area, South of Bolívar, Catatumbo and Bajo Cauca.

According to Insight Crime, the ELN operates in at least [23 of the 32](#) departments in Colombia. The main strongholds of the ELN are the departments of Chocó, Bolívar, Norte de Santander, and Arauca. There they control part of drug trafficking, smuggling and extortion. To a lesser extent, but with strategic positions, the ELN is also in the departments of Antioquia, Cesar, Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Nariño and Vichada. These departments are key for their coca crops, cocaine production or smuggling routes to Ecuador and Venezuela. On the other hand, the border with Venezuela has also become the most important region for the ELN (Insight Crime, 19 October 2022). Human Rights Watch reports that the fighting between armed groups on the Colombia-Venezuela border has caused a [dramatic increase](#) in violence in the early months of 2022 (HRW, 28 March 2022). Members of the Venezuelan Bolivarian National Armed Forces and the Bolivarian National Guard have participated in joint operations with ELN guerrilla fighters and have been complicit in their abuses.

To boost security, the new government under President Gustavo Petro has proposed a plan for ["Total Peace"](#) (CNN, 15 November 2022), a proposal to include both guerrillas and drug traffickers in negotiations. In line with this, the government is offering to suspend aerial bombardments against illegal armed groups to avoid collateral damage to the civilian population and the death of forcibly recruited minors. In the same way, it has renewed the line of command for the armed forces and national police force. It has suspended from extradition orders to the

USA drug traffickers who agree to negotiate with the government and not reoffend. It has also resumed peace talks with the National Liberation Army (ELN), with the president of Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro, acting as guarantor. Due to the presence of the ELN in Venezuela, Maduro's participation is considered by observers to be a [clever plan](#), since there would be no possibility of making progress in talks without the cooperation of the Venezuelan government (El Espectador, 30 September 2022).

Households participating in the 'National Comprehensive Program for the Substitution of Illicit Crops' continued to be subjected to threats and killings by criminal groups. This is especially [worrying](#) considering that in 2021, coca cultivation reached record levels in Colombia, breaking the downward trend of the previous three years (UNODC, October 2022). Cocaine production also reached a record high, maintaining the upward trend since 2014. 62% of coca crops are concentrated in Nariño, Norte de Santander, and Putumayo. Although the national government has allocated funds for developing municipalities prioritized for the implementation of the peace agreement, areas where most coca crops are grown have so far experienced no improvement in security conditions, road infrastructure or access to markets. Additionally, the economic vulnerability of these areas has risen since the COVID-19 crisis began (UNODC, October 2022).

When guerrillas or criminal groups take possession of a town or community for drug trafficking or plantation use, one of the first steps they take is to exert their authority over the local population through violence. Additionally, these groups seek to recruit young men, women and even children. Boys, girls and adolescents who live in the poorest and most marginalized communities in Colombia are being [exploited](#) to fuel the criminal expansion of the country's armed actors, with the departments of Córdoba, Antioquia and Chocó being the most affected (Universidad del Rosario, 11 February 2022). Guerrillas and other criminal groups controlling territory constantly try to silence those who represent an obstacle to their illegal activities. Community leaders, including church leaders, thus become victims of violence. The risk is greater for leaders involved in promoting human rights, denouncing corruption and participating in politics or in activities that seek to influence the population (especially young people). Assassinations and threats transmit a [clear message](#) to the local population: "Remain silent, leave your land, do not defend your rights", or: "Stay within the invisible borders demarcated by the armed groups" (ICG, 6 October 2020).

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has [reported](#) that there are six armed conflicts and other types of violence in Colombia that drastically affect people's lives. These conflicts involve the Colombian state versus the ELN, the AGC, former FARC, Border Command AB and the Second Marquetalia. Among the violent actions they carry out are threats, killings, arbitrary deprivation of liberty, restriction of movement, displacement, sexual violence, use of explosives, looting, physical abuse, forced disappearances, among others (ICRC, 23 March 2022). The IACHR has also voiced its [concern](#) over the violence related to the actions of non-state armed groups in Colombia, including homicides, confinement, attacks on local media outlets, attacks on humanitarian missions, attacks on public streets, threats and harassment of the population; restrictions on the operation of public institutions; closure of shops and food shortages; and the interception and incineration of public transport vehicles (IACHR, 25 February 2022). Additionally, in the period from 13 March 2021 to 13 June 2022, the Electoral Observation



Mission (MOE) recorded a total of 751 [acts of violence](#) against political, social, and community leaders in the country (MOE, June 2022). Compared to the national elections of 2018, that represents an increase in violence of 115.8%, with killings increasing by 3.8%. The MOE report also showed that the municipalities with the highest levels of risk of violence were those with the lowest electoral participation - i.e., the threats were effective and many people in these territories refrained from voting.

On many occasions, church leaders have [called upon](#) the authorities to introduce measures to reduce the level of criminal activity in the poorest areas (Agenzia Findes, 15 February 2022). Some church leaders head groups seeking to assist peace efforts. One such entity is the National Conciliation Commission, which is [mediating](#) talks to end the conflict on the Colombian-Venezuelan border (Vida Nueva Digital, 6 February 2022). In many cases where representatives of the official state authorities fail to attend talks, the main [intermediaries](#) are Catholic bishops, priests and catechists, as well as their Evangelical counterparts (Crux, 17 February 2022).

The increased levels of control gained by criminal groups during the pandemic has made it easier for them to exert power over entire territories and in the process threaten church leaders advocating for peace and opposing criminal activity. Christian religious leaders are being [threatened](#) (CNA, 9 February 2022), [displaced](#) (FoRB, 1 December 2020) and/or attacked. Churches have also been burgled and vandalized. Violence against women and girls, particularly sexual violence, is another factor of concern. Threats are made which prevent the victims from speaking out, thus obscuring the gravity of this problem.

Forced recruitment of young adolescents (primarily boys) poses an ongoing threat to Christian communities. Reports indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has been exploited by criminal groups to upscale recruitment and gang activity ([COALICO, 2020](#); [OLIRE, 2020](#)). Refusing to join gangs is not an option, causing many to flee for fear of reprisals ([Open Doors International, 1 March 2021](#)). As highlighted in a [2018 World Watch Monitor report](#), Christian women and girls are at times sexually assaulted by armed groups as a means of punishing their male relatives (commonly church leaders). There are also increasing [reports](#) of the use of sexual violence by rival groups against men and boys in conflict zones as a means of torture, intimidation, and coercion to gain territorial control (Reliefweb, June 2022).

## Trends analysis

### 1) Political instability has intensified the national crisis

Although attempts have been made to overcome the negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis, it has left deep consequences for the country to cope with. Coupled with the multidimensional problems that already existed, the consequences of COVID have allowed the instability of the political situation - especially in the electoral context - to affect other dimensions in society, such as the humanitarian dimension, the issue of migration and, above all, citizen security. The Church's efforts to mediate dialogue and provide assistance to those most in need often places Christians in a situation of vulnerability and fails to generate a greater impact for positive change.

## 2) The increase in violence directly affects the Church

The statistics for violence continue to show a rise due to the expansion of activities by a wide variety of criminal groups that operate facing an ineffective response from the government and an apparent abandonment of the agreed timeline for the implementation of the Peace Agreement. Territorial control exerted by criminal groups grew during the COVID-19 crisis, causing Christians to face greater risks because their activities contradict criminal interests. Christian leaders are thus a frequent target for these groups which have the freedom to act with almost total impunity, especially when it comes to attacking churches and church leaders.

## 3) Signs of social intolerance towards the Church are increasing

Social discontent with the status quo and the effects of the overall crisis in the country have caused citizens to oppose any voice that is seen as an authority. This context, together with the greater activism of militant pressure groups, has caused an increase in intolerance towards faith-based views being expressed in public debate, especially concerning the issues of family, marriage and religious freedom. Church buildings have also been under attack in the form of vandalism.

## External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: presidential election - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/20/former-guerrilla-gustavo-petro-wins-colombian-election-to-become-first-leftist-president>
- Recent history: demonstrations - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/04/colombia-protest-duque-bogota>
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- Recent history: joined - <https://andina.pe/agencia/noticia-paises-prosur-acuerdan-fortalecer-coordinacion-contra-covid19-799031.aspx>
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## WWL 2023: Church information / Colombia

### Christian origins

Christianity came to Colombia through Spain's conquest and colonization from 1492 onwards. The Roman Catholic Church was able to establish itself as the sole Christian denomination. After Colombia gained independence from Spain in 1810, the Vatican in Rome established formal relations with the new state in 1835. The Roman Catholic Church took on an increasing political presence in the country which caused much friction with the political leaders of the time. As a result, Catholics were persecuted and religious communities such as the Jesuits were expelled from the country in 1851 and 1861.

In 1877 the radical government's attempts to establish a 'neutral' educational system degenerated into civil war with the active participation of several bishops and clerics. In 1886 the relationship between Church and State was settled in a new constitution which recognized the Catholic Church as the basis for national unity.

The loss of Catholic hegemony began with the arrival of the Presbyterian Church in the middle of the 19th century. At the beginning of the 20th century Baptists and other Protestants arrived. In the 1960s the religious landscape began to change visibly due to social, economic and cultural changes caused by modernization, urbanization and literacy. Pentecostalism came from the USA and became very popular and this new Christian diversity was recognized in 1991 in the new Constitution of Colombia.

### Church spectrum today

Colombia: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	11,200	0.0
Catholic	44,124,000	90.0
Protestant	1,899,000	3.9
Independent	2,619,000	5.3
Unaffiliated	502,000	1.0
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-152,000	-0.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>49,003,200</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	1,339,000	2.7
Renewalist movement	16,546,000	33.8

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

**Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

The main Christian denomination in Colombia is the Roman Catholic Church, representing 90% of all Christians according to WCD 2022 estimates, maintaining the same affiliation ratio as in the previous year. Protestant church groups continue to show growth and become more visible, particularly where so-called 'Mega-churches' with congregations of thousands have become established in many major cities.

## Areas where Christians face most difficulties

- **For Organized corruption and crime:** According to the violence data gathered by organizations such as PARES and JUSTAPAZ and the reports from Open Doors researchers, Christians experience high levels of pressure and violence from criminal organizations and illegal armed groups in the following areas: Antioquia, Arauca, Bolivar, Caquetá, Casanare, Cauca, Cesar, Chocó, Córdoba, Guaviare, Huila, Magdalena, Meta, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Putumayo, Santander, Sucre, Tolima, Valle del Cauca, Vichada.
- **For Clan oppression:** Especially in indigenous communities with the most traditional customs and, in consequence, with less acceptance of other (Christian) rites than those of their own ethnicity, those who abandon the religious practices of the tribe face persecution. In Colombia there are 115 indigenous groups, of which 22 were recently included in the last [census](#) carried out in 2018 (DANE Informacion para todos, 16 September 2019). These native peoples are located in the 32 departments of the country. According to Open Doors researchers, indigenous Christians face the highest levels of discrimination, intolerance and violence in Cauca, Cesar, Choco, Huila, Magdalena, Norte de Santander.
- **For Secular intolerance:** This engine of persecution depends on the public policies implemented by the national government and on social attitudes within society, mainly encouraged by intolerant groups with ideologies against religion or Christianity. Secular intolerance is present throughout the country, especially in urban areas such as Antioquia, Bogotá, Bolívar, Boyacá, Caldas, Cauca, Cundinamarca, Huila, Nariño, Quindío, Risaralda, Santander, Tolima and Valle.

## Christian communities and how they are affected

### Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation. These communities are therefore not scored as a separate category in WWL analysis.

### Historical Christian communities

This category consists mainly of Roman Catholic churches and small Orthodox and Protestant communities. These groups are in danger of attacks in areas controlled by drug cartels and by



other forms of organized crime and guerrillas. They also struggle with the increasing religious intolerance in society and its increasing rejection of faith-based views in public debate, not to mention the obstacles and risks of church-work within indigenous communities (particularly as experienced by Protestant Christians). In sporadic cases, some Protestants face rejection from historical churches (such as the Catholic Church), as part of the dynamic of the Persecution engine *Christian denominational protectionism*.

### **Converts**

For Colombia, this category includes converts within indigenous communities and converts to Christianity from guerrilla groups and criminal organizations. Especially in the indigenous context, converts are victims of harassment, expulsion, death-threats, and other physical and psychological forms of violence for abandoning the majority belief-system within the community to which they belong. Converts are also affected by criminal networks in the same way as Christians belonging to Historical and Non-traditional Christian communities, especially if they are former members of illegal groups.

### **Non-traditional Christian communities**

This category is mainly made up of Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations. They are also affected by the pressure and violence exerted by organized criminal groups and guerrillas, in the same way as Historical Christian communities. Although the government has recognized their important role in the implementation of the FARC peace agreement and its humanitarian assistance in neglected areas, these denominations do not receive the same government benefits granted to the country's historical churches and those churches which signed a covenant with the state. In addition, where they try to participate in the political sphere, they face severe opposition from secularist pressure groups. They are not free to work within indigenous communities and face risk when doing so.

## **External Links - Church information**

- Areas where Christians face most difficulties: census - <https://www.dane.gov.co/files/investigaciones/boletines/grupos-etnicos/presentacion-grupos-etnicos-2019.pdf>

# WWL 2023: Persecution Dynamics / Colombia

## Reporting period

1 October 2021 - 30 September 2022

## Position on the World Watch List

Colombia: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	71	22
WWL 2022	68	30
WWL 2021	67	30
WWL 2020	62	41
WWL 2019	58	47

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

The rise in total score by 3 points was in particular due to the high number of violent incidents targeting Christians during the reporting period, especially killings. Pressure increased on average mainly due to the active presence of criminal groups in many areas of the country hindering Christian activities (at the individual and collective level). In Colombian society in general, intolerance of faith-based views in public debate has increased and indigenous Christians continue facing great obstacles inside their communities of origin.

## Persecution engines

Colombia: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Not at all
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Strong
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Medium
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Not at all
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Strong

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

## Organized corruption and crime (Strong)

The Corruption Perception Index (CPI 2021) CPI ranks Colombia #87 out of 180, with a 39/100 score (0 = highly corrupt and 100 = zero corruption). Despite the initial efforts in the implementation of the FARC Peace Agreement, six years after it signing, FARC dissidents, members of the ELN and other guerrilla groups (referred to as "[Illegal Armed Groups](#)" – Colombia reports, 3 October 2021) [fight for control](#) of entire regions to carry out their illegal activities (ICG, 03 November 2021). During the WWL 2023 reporting period this was especially happening in areas such as the Pacific coast and Colombia's border with Venezuela, where illicit markets related to smuggling, illegal crops, drug trafficking and illegal mining are being [disputed](#) by several criminal groups attempting to control those territories and worsening the general humanitarian and security situation (HRW, 28 March 2022).

This context has led to both church leaders and Christian groups being victims of systematic monitoring, abduction, threats, extortion, forced displacement and killings, as well as there being attacks against public Christian properties and direct threats against pastors' children (concerning rape or forced recruitment). These measures are especially addressed to Christians who actively oppose criminal activity, speak out defending human rights, preach to combatants and civilians, carry out prayer activities in particularly violent areas and discourage young people from joining criminal groups.

Criminal groups also retaliate against former guerrilla members who abandon crime as a result of their conversion to Christian faith. The strengthening of criminal networks and their active presence in many areas of the country after the COVID-19 lockdown has allowed them to continue to be the [de facto authorities](#) in areas of the country where state activity is virtually non-existent. They have continued to impose lockdown measures in many of the territories under their control (ACAPS, 18 February 2022). Also, the high levels of corruption allow them [to act with impunity](#) (Al-Jazeera, 16 July 2022) which means they continue to threaten the peace, and did this especially during the 2022 [electoral period](#) (Insight Crime, 27 May 2022). One example of this was how criminal groups put pressure on churches and church leaders to show support for certain political candidates during the elections.

Criminal groups also increased church monitoring to make sure anything that could harm their interests was prohibited, and they increased their harassment against Christians considered to be police informers or involved with other rival criminal groups. If Christians refuse to follow criminal group orders, they are perceived as a threat. During the WWL 2023 reporting period, Christians faced attempts at extortion, harassment, surveillance, interrogation, restrictions on movement, death-threats, in-country and out of country forced displacement, attacks on both private property and church buildings, sexual harassment, rape, abduction and killings.

While indigenous communities are often the most affected by organized crime since their territory is frequently co-opted by drug traffickers and guerrillas, some indigenous leaders rely on criminal groups to intimidate indigenous Christian converts and thus force them to return to the community's syncretistic practices. Further, the level of violence in such places is also very high as a result of clashes between government troops and criminal groups and due to fighting between different criminal groups.

### Clan oppression (Strong)

As described above (in *Religious landscape*) concerning 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' in indigenous communities, the religious factor is an important component of indigenous culture and identity. Religion in their communities is often related to syncretistic practices adapted from Roman Catholic rites. Any type of preaching or religious activity requires permission from the leaders and anything going against the customs of the ethnic group will be seen as a threat and punished.

Such punishments (especially of converts to 'non-accepted forms of Christianity'), which may also involve their families, can include imprisonment, imposition of fines, physical abuse, denying access to basic goods and the confiscation of property. Obtaining protection from the government in these circumstances is difficult; state access to rural areas is often not possible and this has reinforced the concept of indigenous autonomy and the power of local leaders. Adherents of 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' face severe opposition because of their faith and do not have the possibility of leaving their community without losing their land rights.

### Secular intolerance (Medium)

The religious sector is considered an important element in supporting the implementation of the FARC peace agreement and social and humanitarian assistance during the COVID-19 crisis in the country. But increasingly, Christians face verbal attacks, social hostilities, and discrimination due to intolerance towards faith-based beliefs and practices. A strict interpretation of state secularism frequently places religious freedom and the right of conscience at odds with the right to non-discrimination. Society and institutions reject Christian professionals' assertion of the right to conscientious objection. There is also pressure to remove from public office any officials who openly defend their Christian faith or affinity towards a specific church. Christian participation in the political sphere of the country has diminished as a result.

## Drivers of persecution

Colombia: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	-	-	-	STRONG	WEAK	-	MEDIUM	-	STRONG
Government officials	-	-	-	Medium	Very weak	-	Medium	-	Medium
Ethnic group leaders	-	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	Very weak
Non-Christian religious leaders	-	-	-	Strong	-	-	Very weak	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	Weak	Weak	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-

Colombia: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	-	-	-	STRONG	WEAK	-	MEDIUM	-	STRONG
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	Very weak	-	-	Medium	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	-	-	-	Medium	Very weak	-	Weak	-	Weak
One's own (extended) family	-	-	-	Strong	Weak	-	Very weak	-	Weak
Political parties	-	-	-	-	-	-	Weak	-	Weak
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	Weak	-	-	-	-	Strong
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	Weak	-	-	-	-	Strong
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	Very weak	-	-	Very weak	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

### Drivers of Organized corruption and crime

- Organized crime cartels or networks (Strong):** There is a strong link between crime cartels and revolutionary and paramilitary groups; their motives for targeting Christians are very similar and they act mainly in rural areas where the presence of the state authorities is weak. These groups (Gulf Clan, Black Eagles, Los Rastrojos, Los Paisas, Caparrapos, La Constru, Los Costeños, the Border Command and many others) fight each other for territorial control and target Christians and Christian organizations that carry out activities promoting peace, human rights for indigenous people and help against drug addiction. More recently, Christians have been targeted when they try to provide humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable sectors of society and refuse to support activities favoring the illegal interests of those groups. Christians are viewed as a threat to criminal interests, especially when they defy criminal group orders.
- Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Strong):** These groups (such as FARC dissidents, the ELN and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia) closely monitor church activities and impose restrictions on them. They threaten, displace and attack Christians for working in support of the FARC Peace Agreement, for promoting human rights and opposing violence, for assisting displaced persons, for helping with land restitution claims, for not following the orders regarding the promotion of coca cultivation, for providing material and spiritual assistance during the COVID-19 crisis, for encouraging the participation in elections in favor of those who defend Christian values, and when they did not want to comply with orders to join the demonstrations against the government. These illegal groups accuse Christians of betrayal if they are perceived to be involved with the government or with rival

criminal groups and are very interested in discouraging the growth of local churches.

- **Government officials (Medium):** Many government officials have directly and indirectly allowed criminal actions to take place against Christian leaders and churches in areas under gang control. Both the authorities and criminals can then act with impunity, especially because some authorities are in collusion with organized crime cartels and other criminal groups. The authorities' indifference towards the hostilities faced by Christians in this context is often denounced by Christian leaders, but the fear of reprisals is permanent.
- **Political parties (Medium):** Corruption among members of the political class helps promote the cover-up of criminal group activities and they hinder progress in the implementation of the FARC Peace Agreement. Their decisions reinforce impunity, allowing organized crime cartels to continue with their illegal activities and exert violence against Christians in the most neglected areas of the country. Furthermore, in the most recent local elections, there was evidence that corruption was so strong that criminal groups could justify their violent actions as a form of support for a political party; they used violence and intimidation to influence the 'Christian vote' to help achieve party goals.

#### Drivers of Clan oppression

- **Ethnic group leaders (Strong):** These leaders remain loyal to their traditional beliefs and oppose anyone spreading non-accepted forms of Christian faith in the indigenous communities. Restrictions take the form of constant monitoring, cutting basic services, arrests, threats, violence and of reporting Christians to the ethnic religious authorities.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** Shamanism, ethno-religions and similar cults, although not strictly classified as religions, are manifestations of a kind of 'spirituality' that reject Christianity. In the indigenous communities, adherents will attempt to impede Christian activities and force Christians to be part of their ancestral ceremonies. Pressure increased when there were mobility restrictions, since many adherents of 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' found themselves isolated and almost totally at the mercy of the indigenous authorities.
- **One's own (extended) family (Strong):** Belonging to the indigenous community is expected to have a higher priority than family ties, thus any family member abandoning the religious syncretistic practices of the community to become an adherent of a 'non-accepted form of Christianity' is liable to be labeled a traitor and face rejection from their wider family.
- **Citizens (Medium):** Members of indigenous communities must be faithful to the tribe and their customs. Therefore, they are bound to denounce any practice that may hinder the stability of the community, including the activities of converts to a 'non-accepted form of Christianity'.
- **Government officials (Medium):** The authorities collaborate by either allowing or ignoring discrimination and violence aimed at Christians who refuse to follow the syncretistic practices of the indigenous communities. The authorities regard some Christian leaders as

enemies of the cultural identity of the ethnic group and in consequence, as a threat to the preservation of indigenous customs.

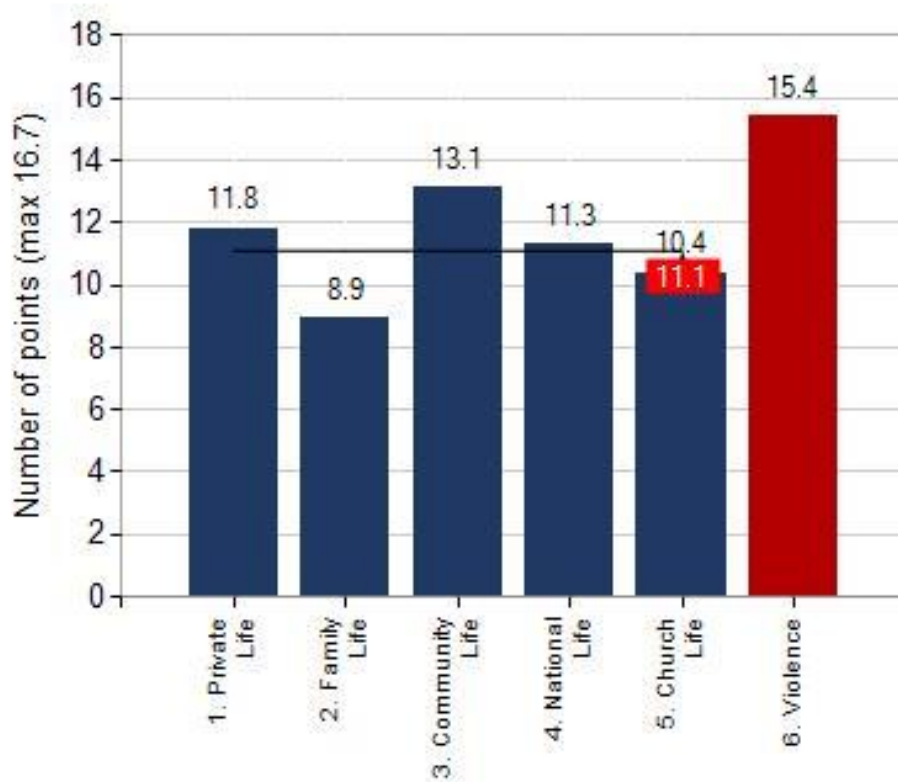
- **Revolutionary or paramilitary groups (Medium):** Although ethnic groups are also victims of paramilitary groups at times, there are nevertheless occasions when guerrillas have teamed up with indigenous leaders to harass converts to a 'non-accepted form of Christianity'. This cooperation aims to defend ethnic group leaders' interests and to force - most often by violent means - those Christians to stop practicing their non-accepted faith in the community.
- **Organized crime cartels or networks (Medium):** Organized crime cartels have sometimes acted in complicity with indigenous leaders to intimidate adherents of a 'non-accepted form of Christianity' in the communities. Such cooperation aims to defend ethnic group leaders' interests and to put those adherents under strict control, thus preventing them from spreading their Christian faith inside the community.

#### Drivers of Secular intolerance

- **Ideological pressure groups (Medium):** These groups harass, ridicule and censor Christians when the latter express faith-based points of views that disagree with their interests. This is particularly the case if they are public officials who wish to uphold their Christian beliefs or doctors claiming the right to conscientious objection. Also, they have carried out violent demonstrations outside churches as a way of showing their rejection of faith-based views on the issue of abortion. Some of these groups are pushing for mandatory content on issues of sexuality in school curricula which overrides parents' rights concerning the education of their children according to their own faith-based values.
- **Government officials (Medium):** It is common that state authorities, including some ministries and some judges at local and national court level, support the interests of political pressure groups opposing any presence of faith-based views in public debate. As a result, the judicial authorities tend not to give Christians the same protection and equal opportunities allotted to other groups when it comes to protecting the right to freedom of expression.
- **Political parties (Medium):** Some political parties demand radical Church-State separation with no participation of Christians in the political arena. As a result, they actively hinder political initiatives coming from Christian politicians or politicians supported by Christian groups. They also promote non-discrimination initiatives that potentially undermine the free expression of Christian citizens.

## The Persecution pattern

WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern for Colombia



The WWL 2023 Persecution pattern for Colombia shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Colombia is at a very high level, having risen from 10.9 points in WWL 2022 to 11.1 points in WWL 2023. This rise was mainly due to the high levels of pressure exerted by criminal groups on Christians in many parts of the country.
- All *spheres of life* scored 8.9 points or above (out of a maximum of 16.7 points), with pressure highest in the *Community sphere of life* (13.1 points).
- The score for violence is extremely high, increasing from 13.3 points in WWL 2022 to 15.4 points in WWL 2023. There were more incidents reported, for instance, of sexual harassment, of public Christian properties being attacked, of Christian businesses being attacked, and of Christians being forced to leave the country.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

*In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2023 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).*



## Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

### **Block 1.9: It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians. (3.25 points)**

For Christians to meet up with fellow believers is particularly risky in indigenous communities or in territories controlled by organized crime. If they do, they are quickly accused of not following community norms or of not complying with curfews or other rules imposed by gangs and of conspiring against the ethnic or criminal leaders. This includes meetings which are not for worship purposes. Due the humanitarian and security crisis existing in the country's Pacific Coast, control and monitoring increased there, making it even more difficult for Christians to be in contact with each other and it is necessary to ask permission from criminal leaders in order to be able to meet with other Christians.

### **Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (3.00 points)**

Christians face various levels of risk. Where organized crime is dominant, it is highly risky for anyone to make a public call for peace or for resisting involvement in criminal activities. Any kind of communication or publication is monitored and easily identified by criminal groups. This was particularly common during the WWL 2023 reporting period: During the election period, social media networks were the main communication resource for defending religious beliefs when publicly asking for peace, for an end to impunity, and for the eradication of drugs, etc. Illegal groups attacked Christians who did not support their demands against the authorities, or refused to endorse their political standpoint, or raised their voices against violence and criminal activities.

Christians may face hostilities from ideological pressure groups when they defend their faith-based opinions online.

### **Block 1.6: It has been risky for Christians to access Christian radio or TV, or Christian material on the Internet. (2.75 points)**

In indigenous communities (e.g., Arhuaco ethnic group), access to Christian media is difficult. When it is possible and an adherent of a 'non-accepted form of Christianity' uses it to spread the Christian faith, he will be punished by the ethnic leaders because it could influence other indigenous members to convert. In areas co-opted by criminal groups, accessing or using Christian material with contents that could affect the interests of these groups (e.g. denunciations of illegal activities or encouragement for conversion to Christianity) will be punished. Christian content is often considered harmful for criminal groups exerting their authority in an area, especially books which present Jesus as a solution for the problem of violence.

### **Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (2.75 points)**

In the indigenous community worldview, the concept of fidelity to ethnicity prevails over family ties. Thus, a member of a family who converts to Christianity or belongs to a 'non-accepted form of Christianity' will be rejected by the extended family and accused before the ethnic leaders.

The same goes for areas dominated by criminal groups, especially when a family member's faith clearly opposes the criminal activities of local groups. Similarly, there were some situations where the new Protestant faith of a family member was not accepted by his/her wider Roman Catholic family, particularly those living in rural areas of the country.

In the context of growing hostility towards faith-based views on such issues as abortion, family and marriage etc., a Christian may find that he/she has no freedom to discuss such issues outside the immediate family.

## Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

### **Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (3.25 points)**

In both indigenous schools and government-run schools, the right of parents to raise their children according to their religious beliefs is often violated through compulsory classes that contradict their Christian principles.

In order to prevent any 'destabilization of indigenous identity', ethnic leaders often threaten parents belonging to a 'non-accepted form of Christianity' and try to prevent them from passing on their faith to their children. They sometimes arrange that the children of such Christians be raised by other relatives or other members of the indigenous community that adhere to the indigenous customs (which often include the use of witchcraft, charms, shamanism etc.) in order to ensure that ancestral traditions are maintained. Within the areas controlled by criminal networks, Christian parents can hardly prevent their children from being indoctrinated or recruited by ELN and dissident FARC guerrillas because any opposition could lead to their assassination or expulsion from their land and homes. The intention of these groups is to influence the youth so that a criminal attitude becomes embedded in society. The forced recruitment of children increased noticeably during the last few WWL reporting periods.

Elsewhere in Colombia, parents face difficulties raising their children according to Christian convictions because of the promotion in schools of compulsory sexual education which contradicts traditional Christian teaching. The Constitutional Court has already established that school regulations must respect gender identity issues and the chosen sexual orientation of their students, which can jeopardize the whole ethos of Christian denominational schools and the right of parents to raise their children according to their convictions. This can be especially challenging in cities such as Bucaramanga, Cali, Medellín, Cartagena, Villavicencio, Santa Marta, Barranquilla and Bogotá. Even when parents choose a Christian school for their children, neither the institution nor the parents can legally prevent the promotion of content that contradicts their religious beliefs.

### **Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.25 points)**

In the context of indigenous communities, schools have become an area of pressure for those adhering to 'non-accepted forms of Christianity'. Since the educational legislation of 1994, the

Associations of Traditional Indigenous Authorities (AATIs) were granted full authority to administer their educational institutions with an emphasis on ethnic education, which openly and legally promotes their animist worldview, thus contradicting biblical values. Indigenous education aims to maintain the cultural identity of the ethnic group. Community beliefs are then taught, which are clearly anti-Christian and indigenous Christian families struggle with this difficult situation and often choose not to send their children to school, which clearly limits their future possibilities. Also, such parents could be involved in legal proceedings that would cause them to temporarily or permanently lose legal custody of their children.

Elsewhere in Colombia, the content approved for education bears a significant secularist influence and promotes attitudes that consider faith-based opinions to be discriminatory, intolerant, and unwelcome in the public sphere. An example are the school [‘Coexistence manuals’](#) which deal with a wide range of mandatory topics on sexuality, which many Christian parents consider inappropriate for their children (Ministerio de Education Nacional, 17 December 2015). Examples of such topics are: “Recreational sexuality”, “sexual orientation”, “gender identity”, “sexual diversity”, “sexual and reproductive duties ” (a term that includes abortion), as well as “freely choosing a sexual partner”. Children who want to continue their studies successfully are forced to participate in such classes.

Further, state schools do not always provide alternative religious classes for those Christians that are not Catholic. To obtain good grades, sometimes non-Catholic schoolchildren are obliged to join in Catholic activities organized by the school and are required to learn Catholic doctrine.

**Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents’ faith. (3.25 points)**

Children of Christian indigenous parents often face pressure to make them not follow their parent's faith. Sometimes these children are excluded from community activities, are mocked, threatened with forced marriage and mistreated to prevent them from spreading any 'non-accepted Christian' influence. This both discourages possible new conversions and puts pressure on parents to renounce their Christian faith. Sometimes the pressure becomes so great that the family feels forced to leave the area in order to protect the Christian children. In areas co-opted by organized crime, it is common that guerrilla groups recruit children from an early age, and children from Christian families are particularly at risk. This is done to put pressure on families and make them stop their Christian activities and stop resisting orders given by the local criminal 'authorities'. This method of intimidation against Christian parents is also a cause of internal forced displacement.

Elsewhere in Colombia (especially in urban areas), due to the growth of intolerance towards faith-based views in society, some Christian children are mocked when they defend faith-based point of views regarding abortion, family, marriage and sexuality in classes, and refuse to participate in activities supporting the interests of political pressure groups.

In some cases, Christian children of certain Christian denominations suffer bullying because of the clothes they wear. In rural areas, there are sporadic cases where non-Catholic children are discriminated against by being given lower marks than they deserve because they belong to a non-Catholic denomination.

**Block 2.10: Christian spouses and/or children of Christians have been subject to separation for prolonged periods of time by circumstances relating to persecution. (3.00 points)**

Adherents of a 'non-accepted form of Christianity' who have been expelled from indigenous communities are often forced into separation from their families (wives and children) as a punishment for not giving up their faith. There are even cases, as mentioned above, in which children are separated from their families to prevent them from being raised as Christian believers.

The number of IDPs continues to rise due to violence in the growing number of areas controlled by criminal and guerrilla groups throughout the country. In such areas, the dominant criminal group has the authority to decide who can live in their zone; as a consequence, those Christians who are not welcome in the community have been forced (via threats or direct orders) to leave their families and be involuntarily separated from them for long periods. In addition, Christians are sometimes forced to leave their homes in order to protect their children from being recruited by criminal groups, but this has been made especially difficult by the restrictions on mobility imposed by such groups (e.g., in Valle del Cauca).

There have been sporadic cases where the pressure to comply with non-Christian activities and rituals has led some parents to send their children away to relatives where there is more freedom for Christians not belonging to the traditional faith of the community.

## Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

**Block 3.4: Christians been hindered in sharing community resources because of their faith (e.g. clean drinking water). (3.25 points)**

In some indigenous communities, those following 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' are not regarded as being true members of the ethnic group, they are not part of the community census and are excluded from basic resources (often including access to clean water and health facilities) or from financial benefits (even those granted by state), as a way to pressurize them into stopping their activities. The lack of access to drinking water continues to affect several indigenous Christian communities of the Nasa ethnic group in Cauca and Huila. Christians in the communities of Bari, El Tablón, Eden, Epena, Sanaan, and La Guinea share the same difficulties. The obstacles to free mobility imposed by criminals during the WWL 2023 reporting period made it even more difficult for Christians to go and request such basic resources from neighboring communities.

In other areas, criminal groups have prevented Christians from receiving government aid or humanitarian aid from other civil society actors and have accused Christians of being informers. In departments such as Choco, Nariño, Antioquia, Cesar, Putumayo and Norte de Santander, criminal groups have directly blamed Christians for bringing information to other groups when obtaining food (such as fish or crops). Criminal groups are keen to ensure that Christian leaders (or the Christian community itself) remain loyal to their authority and regularly threaten them with attack, abduction or death should they not be compliant. Also, as a way of intimidating churches, criminal groups sometimes cut off the electricity and water supplies to hinder religious activities.

**Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (3.25 points)**

Given the importance of community life within ethnic groups, Christians are expected to participate in community events and to take part in religious festivities in indigenous communities. If they refuse, they are viewed as traitors and punished (this has happened, for example, in indigenous communities in Magdalena and Cauca). Punishments include imprisonment, beatings, forced labor, isolation, displacement, etc. By their not attending community rituals, Christians are often blamed for any unfortunate events that occur. There is also evidence that, in some indigenous territories, the traditional authorities have forged alliances with illegal armed groups to ensure full participation in ceremonies and activities.

Although criminal groups do not hold their own religious ceremonies or organize community events as such, leaders of such groups can call on the community to make announcements or impose 'new rules', which happened frequently as a way to maintain isolation during the lockdowns imposed by them. When Christians refuse obedience, they receive excessive fines and increased threats of displacement and loss of property.

Elsewhere in Colombia, there were cases reported of Christian workers being placed under severe pressure by their companies to ignore their traditional Christian values and participate in activities promoting the interests of certain political pressure groups.

**Block 3.12: Christians have been fined for faith-related reasons (e.g. jizya tax, community tax, protection money). (3.25 points)**

Indigenous authorities use a system of fines (either in the form of money or harvest products) for Christians who refuse to participate in community practices and festivities that contradict their faith (such as ancestral traditions or even certain festivities based on Catholic rites). Sometimes, when ethnic groups collude with criminals, the fines or quotas are substantially higher for such adherents of 'non-accepted forms of Christianity'.

In a broader context, criminal groups demand protection money (sometimes in the form of quotas or even vaccines) from pastors, priests, and other Christians in exchange for not exercising violence against them and for allowing them to continue their religious duties. In the WWL 2023 reporting period, life in most of the rural areas of the country were de-facto under the control of criminal groups. The situation was even more difficult where territory was in dispute between various criminal groups and all of them demanded 'quotas' to finance their illicit activities; such 'quotas' could include the recruitment of children. Regions like Cauca, Choco, Antioquia, Meta, Putumayo, Huila, Caqueta, Magdalena, Tolima, Norte de Santander, Guaviare, Nariño, Valle del Cauca and Bolivar were greatly affected by this.

Another method of control that has had a harsh effect on rural churches is related to illicit crops. In regions such as Caqueta, Putumayo, Narino, Guaviare, and Meta, illegal armed groups forced Christian residents to plant and work on coca crops. Christians who have refused to participate have faced serious reprisals (including forced displacement) because they are considered enemies of the armed groups.

**Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.25 points)**

In order to limit Christian activities, ethnic leaders make use of monitoring and control mechanisms within the indigenous communities. Thus, adherents of 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' have faced constant interrogation when they refuse to participate in community activities related to payments or rituals or when they intend to carry out any kind of activity related to a faith different from the one followed by the community.

In areas where there is hardly any state authority in existence, criminal groups have become the de facto local authorities. In this capacity, they carried out interrogations to force Christians to inform them about their activities, to look for possible alliances with them, and to obtain information about the movements of other groups, including the security forces. Due to corruption networks, it is possible that in some cases, state officers collaborate with criminal groups and carry out the interrogation of Christians considered to be suspicious.

## Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

**Block 4.14: Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished. (3.50 points)**

In indigenous communities, the discrimination and mistreatment of adherents of 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' goes unpunished because the ethnic and religious leaders are both the instigators and those who impart justice in that jurisdiction. The affected Christians cannot seek court justice before other government entities due to the special indigenous jurisdiction.

Elsewhere, impunity is a widespread phenomenon due to links between criminal leaders and corrupt officials. If a criminal investigation is carried out, the authorities often fail to take into account that Christians are much more vulnerable to criminal attack because their religious convictions are considered a threat by criminal groups and the constant refusal from church leaders to obey criminal orders increases their risk of being attacked. It is also the fear of possible reprisals which discourages Christians from seeking help from the state authorities. Also, in contexts related to radical secularism, signs of intolerance that trigger attacks against churches and Christians have not been properly investigated. In some cases, Christians are being punished instead of being considered victims. Thus, the mistreatment of and discrimination against Christians has become normal practice and is not regarded by the authorities as something that needs to be held in check.

**Block 4.4: Christians have been hindered in travelling for faith-related reasons. (3.25 points)**

Given the position of authority that both indigenous leaders and criminal leaders enjoy in their areas of influence, they control entry and exit from their territories as it suits their interests. Thus, in indigenous communities, entry and exit is restricted as a form of punishment for those adhering to 'non-accepted forms of Christianity', placing them in a position of risk when they meet with other Christians in areas outside the community. Often, the uncertainty of not being able to return to their homes and of possibly losing contact with their families hinders the faith of new converts, as does the lack of contact with faith communities in neighboring territories.

In areas like Amazonas, Chocó, Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Casanare, Meta, Guaviare, Putumayo, Nariño, Antioquia, Sucre, Córdoba, Cesar, Santander, Magdalena and Norte de Santander, criminal leaders prevent Christians (especially church leaders) from travelling. This was particularly the case in the WWL 2023 reporting period. The movement of Christians is seen as being potentially damaging to local illegal interests and because Christians on the move are suspected of acting as informers for the state authorities or other rival groups.

Control exercised by criminal leaders over rural areas (and even in some urban areas) is very strong. Internal sources reported that the Arauca department alone, there were at least 40 points where Christians were under forced restrictions of mobility.

**Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (3.25 points)**

According to indigenous customs, anyone whose faith differs from the community faith has no right to express their views and opinions before the community. The reason is that such people might encourage other indigenous people to follow their religious convictions. Their voice is vetoed since their opinions are assumed to always have a religious motivation, even when the matter of debate is not necessarily linked to church or faith matters. Also, Christians in areas co-opted by a criminal group or guerrillas are not free to express any faith-based opinions which contradict the group's philosophy or which concern the implementation of the FARC Peace Agreement, human rights or environmental issues. The prophetic voice of the Church is thus severely restricted. Since criminal leaders use church informers (e.g., in Arauco, Catatumbo and Cauca), Christians do not feel safe to share their political opinions with others inside churches, let alone in the wider community.

As a sign of the growing intolerance at the national level, Christians have experienced pressure in both traditional media and social media networks when expressing their faith-based views on issues including abortion, family, marriage, sexuality and parental rights. This situation is provoking a self-censorship among Christians.

**Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (3.25 points)**

Given the levels of corruption, state authorities allow criminal groups - directly or indirectly - to hinder the activities of civil society organizations, especially those working with young people in drug and crime prevention programs or with migrants. The work done by Christian civil society organizations in those areas is seen as competing with the criminal groups dominating the area and as a form of defiance to their authority. The local dominant criminal group wants to be the only one who can give permission to carry out projects, meetings, or activities in the area under its control. This also represents a challenge to the functioning of Christian political parties not allied with the dominant criminal groups in such areas.

Additionally, given the autonomy of indigenous leaders to prevent the emergence and development of organizations that they do not consider aligned with their traditions, it makes sense for them to avoid giving any form of support to politicians of Christian faith.

Faith-based organizations are also continually scrutinized by pressure groups and risk lawsuits if an organization's projects, statements and publications are seen as opposing the group's interests or are seen as breaching the principle of Church-State separation.

## Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

### **Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (3.25 points)**

In rural areas controlled by criminal groups (such as in Antioquia, Arauca, Cesar, Valle del Cauca, Chocó, Córdoba, Norte de Santander and others), the latter impose intense surveillance on all preaching, church activities and Christian materials used or distributed. The infiltration of churches by informers (members of criminal groups or their relatives) is common practice and their purpose is to report anything opposing the local criminal group's interests. Pastors must also be very careful with the information stored on their cell phones since it is common practice for groups to demand the handing-over of cell phones at checkpoints. It is becoming increasingly difficult for churches in areas dominated by one or more criminal groups because the prohibitions are constantly being increased. Any preaching mentioning social issues can lead to serious consequences.

Regarding ethnic groups, any preaching carried out by 'non-accepted Christian groups' will be reported and punished according to ancestral customs. Also, in rural areas, there are sporadic cases where the preaching of minority churches is monitored by the largest one (usually by Roman Catholic believers). One intention of such monitoring is to discourage anyone from converting.

In cities like Bogota, Cali and Cartagena, there is increasing social scrutiny by pressure groups of Christian preaching related to the defense of marriage and family and the way churches seek involvement in the public sphere.

### **Block 5.11: Pastors or other Christian leaders (or their family members) have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons. (3.25 points)**

Christian leaders and their families who belong to 'non-accepted Christian groups' are particularly targeted for harassment in indigenous communities. They are often shunned by their community and made to live in very poor conditions. When they share their faith, they are accused of attacking the identity and stability of the ethnic group.

In urban areas, verbal attacks are common where church leaders defend topics related to marriage, family, the sanctity of life, and the presence of the Church in the public sphere. After the re-opening of the churches in 2021, many church leaders were accused of irresponsibly spreading COVID-19 infection. During the election period, they also faced hostile criticism when commenting on political initiatives and promoting Christian values.



In territories co-opted by criminal groups, Christian leaders and their families are the most frequent victims of fines, threats and mobility restrictions, especially if their activities are related to the defense of human rights, environmental issues, work with young people, strengthening civil society organizations, the implementation of the FARC Peace Agreement, assistance for internally displaced persons, assistance with land restitution claims, discouraging coca cultivation and the refusal to collaborate with criminal groups. Pastors' children are a special target for human trafficking, forced recruitment or rape to discourage pastors from continuing their church ministry.

In general, including in indigenous community contexts, since church leaders are often notable public figures, attacks on them are an effective way of intimidating the whole population living in a particular zone.

**Block 5.18: Churches have been hindered in establishing, managing, maintaining and conducting schools, or charitable, humanitarian, medical, social or cultural organizations, institutions and associations. (3.25 points)**

Christian organizations are not allowed to operate in indigenous communities. Christian indigenous schools or health centers are forbidden both by indigenous authorities and by the Colombian government because they are considered to be a threat to the indigenous culture. Those Christians promoting such projects face reprisals from the ethnic leaders.- including the use of violence. Church-affiliated organizations involved in youthwork and the rehabilitation of young drug-addicts are frequently targeted by criminal groups (since they see such programs as a threat to their interests). Also, due to the high level of insecurity and violence in the border areas, some Christian organizations have been unable to carry on their humanitarian assistance for migrants (especially for those coming from Venezuela).

Elsewhere, educational institutions run by churches or other Christian organizations are sometimes under pressure - via threats of closure or fines - to accept the guidelines established by the Ministry of Education in matters relating to sexual education. Faith-based organizations concerned with issues surrounding abortion, family life and marriage have often faced hostile opposition from militant pressure groups. The pressure is so great that many organizations working in the educational field now prefer not to be linked to churches.

**Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (3.25 points)**

Despite efforts by the Central government to promote a culture of respect for religious liberty, non-state actors impede churches and Christian organizations from getting due protection when speaking out against the persecution they experience. In indigenous communities, anyone from 'non-accepted Christian groups' who speaks out against their oppressors, faces threats, beatings, forced displacement, loss of property and arrest, among other measures. It is thus almost impossible to report incidents before state authorities and obtain legal justice.

In areas where organized crime is extremely active, when Christians denounce their aggressors and seek state authority protection, criminal groups often respond with violent reprisals, discouraging any similar future attempts.

Elsewhere in society, it is becoming more frequent that when Christians are victims of acts of intolerance carried out by pressure groups, government officials pay little attention to their reports, claiming that hostile opposition to religion is part of the right to freedom of expression. Radical groups also vandalize church buildings, which generates economic damage and demoralizes Christian communities.

## Violence

*Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following 5 points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:*

**1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced.** Possible reasons for this may be:

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

**2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:**

- *Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).*
- *In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.*
- *Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.*

**3. For further discussion** (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor's article dated 13 November 2013 available at:

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

Colombia: Violence Block question		WWL 2023	WWL 2022
6.1	How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	21	7
6.2	How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	37	96
6.3	How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	6	45
6.4	How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	1	2
6.5	How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	11	4
6.6	How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	57	7
6.7	How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	2
6.8	How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	377	683
6.9	How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	33	6
6.10	How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	25	1
6.11	How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	124	598
6.12	How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	4	1

In the WWL 2023 reporting period, violent incidents against Christians for faith-related reasons remained at an extremely high level. The biggest increases in Block 6 incidents concerned the tripling of the number of Christians killed, and the rise in the number of Christians abducted and sexually harassed, as well as the number of attacks on Christians' private and business property.

- **Christians killed (21):** This category is representative of the seriousness of the persecution situation in the country and reflects the high risk faced by church leaders mostly working in areas dominated by criminal groups and being attacked by them.

- **Churches attacked (37):** Most of the cases were related to attacks perpetrated by criminal groups as a way to intimidate Christians and pressurize them into adhering to their rules. Other cases involved attacks led by ethnic leaders. Also, there were some incidents where militant pressure groups vandalized churches as part of their advocacy for women's rights.
- **Christians arrested (6):** All arrests involved those belonging to 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' in indigenous communities. This was punishment by ethnic leaders when the Christians refused to abandon their faith despite pressure to return to the community traditions.
- **Christians sexually harassed (57):** Most incidents involved Christian women being raped or sexually harassed by members of criminal groups, as a means of intimidating the Church and discouraging the continuation of church activities. Also, there was a case of an indigenous Christian girl who was sexually harassed by ethnic religious leaders and was placed under severe pressure to begin a family with one of the elders of the community.
- **Christians attacked (377):** Most attacks involved Christians being threatened with death by guerrilla and other criminal groups, when their faith-based teaching and activities contradicted the interests of those groups. Other incidents concerned 'non-accepted Christians' being physically abused by indigenous leaders.
- **Christian forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country (124):** Most incidents involved Christians fleeing their homes due to the high levels of violence perpetrated against them (including their children) by criminal groups. Also, 'non-accepted Christians' were expelled from their homes and lands by indigenous authorities.

## 5 Year trends

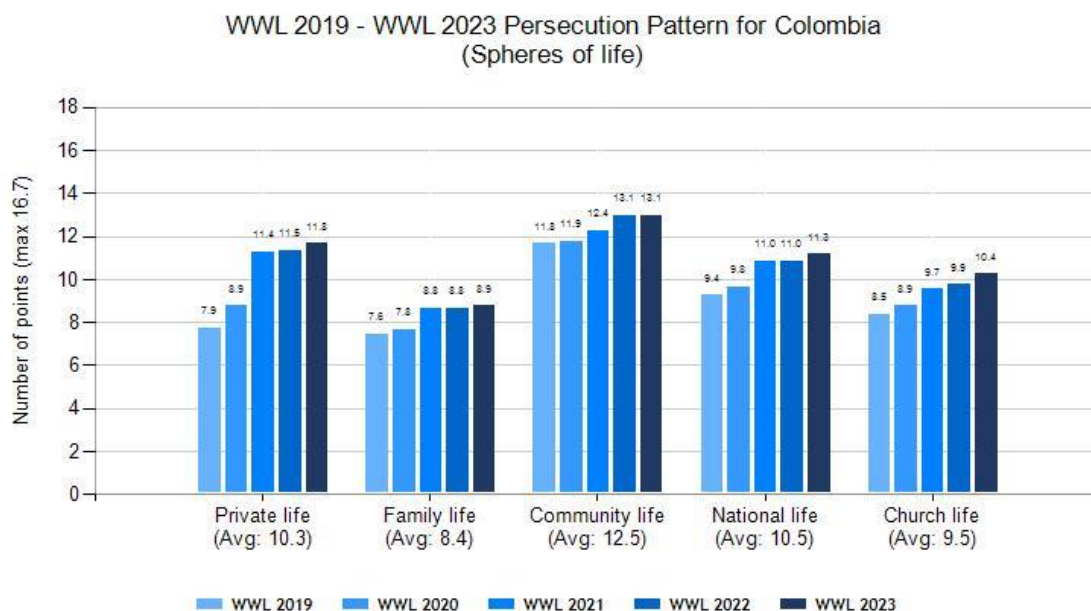
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

### 5 Year trends: Average pressure

Colombia: WWL 2019 - WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2023	11.1
2022	10.9
2021	10.7
2020	9.4
2019	9.0

The table above shows that the average pressure on Christians has been rising consistently in each of the last five WWL reporting periods. The progressive increase is a reflection of the greater control exerted by armed groups in more - mostly rural - areas of the country. Since Christians are seen as being enemies of criminal interests, this expanding control is restricting both the day-to-day running of churches and the free exercise of individual's faith.

## 5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



Over the five WWL reporting periods, all *spheres of life* have shown significant rises in pressure, making it difficult for Christians and religious leaders to freely express their faith in their daily lives due to the interference from mainly non-state actors. This situation has arisen through the high levels of insecurity caused by criminal groups in areas with little state presence, FARC fighting units being re-established, and newer criminal groups emerging and fighting with others to gain control of territory. They have taken advantage of the climate of social and political instability to strengthen their presence and de facto authority. The rise in pressure has also been influenced by increased *Clan oppression* and by the growing hostility (in society in general but also in some government authorities) towards public manifestations of Christian faith. *Secular intolerance* is clearly on the rise.

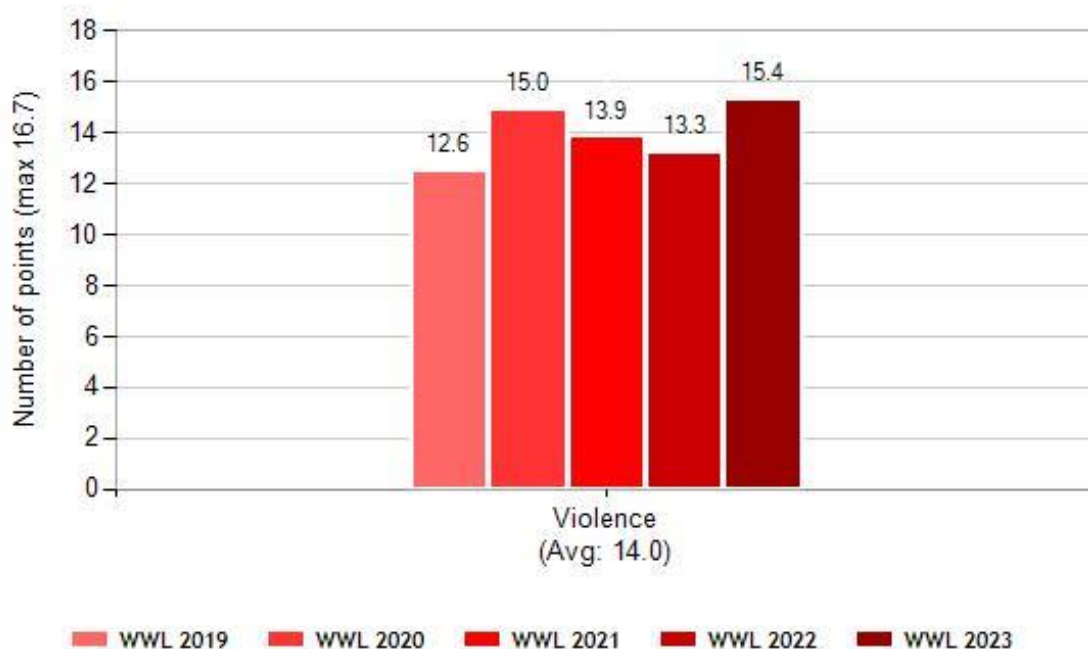
## 5 Year trends: Violence against Christians

The chart below shows that the scores for violence have consistently been at an extreme level, with the highest peak in the current reporting period, WWL 2023. These extreme levels are the result of:

- i. The delays and failures in the complex implementation of the FARC Peace Agreement;
- ii. The expansion of criminal and guerilla groups in ever larger areas of the country, taking advantage of the climate of social and political instability to strengthen their presence and de facto authority;
- iii. The violent repression of Christian converts in indigenous communities.

It is highly probable that many incidents targeting Christians were not reported out of fear of reprisals.

WWL 2019 - WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern for Colombia  
(Violence)



## Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	Discrimination/harassment via education
Political and Legal	Forced marriage
Security	Abduction; Targeted Seduction; Trafficking; Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Denied/restricted healthcare; Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

More than six years after the 2016 Colombian peace agreement referendum, violence remains rife in Colombia; cases of sexual violence against women, especially outspoken female leaders, [continue](#) in rural areas where armed groups use them as a weapon of war to generate fear and silence entire regions (International Crisis Group, 27 January 2022). Women belonging to indigenous and Afro-Colombian ethnic groups are disproportionately [affected](#) by conflict-related violence (ONU Mujeres, Colombia, accessed 7 November 2022). For instance, within indigenous communities, the authorities oppose Christians who refuse to accept the indigenous rites and customs – including compulsory ancestral purification rituals without which access to ‘Western medicine’ is denied. As a result, many women in these communities are deprived of

fundamental healthcare services. One country expert reported that women "cannot access prenatal and maternal-child health services because the ancestral beliefs protected by the government itself endorse midwifery, as an ancestral knowledge and indigenous expression. For other health services, care rights are denied because they do not accept ancestral rites or because they are not considered members of the community."

Furthermore, Christian women may be promised in marriage to non-Christian men in order to eradicate their faith, or be abandoned by their husbands, separated from their children, threatened and ostracized by the community. This exposes them to forced displacement where they are vulnerable to criminal groups, trafficking and sexual exploitation. In areas under criminal control, the guerrilla indoctrination of children also affects Christian girls, since they not only have to accept the violent ideologies imposed despite their faith, but their vulnerability exposes them to becoming victims of abduction, rape, sexual harassment and trafficking. Such criminal activity worsened during the COVID-19 crisis, and spiked rates of forced recruitment and forced prostitution were observed ([USDS, 2022 Trafficking in Person Report: Colombia, 2022](#)).

In gang-held territories, some girls are 'bought' from their parents or brothers on pain of death. This phenomenon also affects Christian families who are put under enormous pressure to surrender their young women, targeted for their perceived purity and obedience, to cartel leaders for sexual purposes – or even marriage. In other instances, the girl may be targeted for seduction. This serves to both satisfy the sexual desires of the criminal commanders, as well as to silence the work of churches. "It has been found that illegal armed groups are showing a tendency to recruit children of Christians because they consider them more vulnerable, innocent, and, in the case of girls, purer (virgins)," a country expert explained. When the girls refuse, they either resort to violent threats or abduction and forced marriage. Another expert asserted that "the forced union between an adolescent and a member of criminal groups is not always presented in the form of 'marriage', but rather due to violence that characterizes their actions, they simply separate a girl or adolescent from their home and force her to live with them, as if they had married."

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Denied inheritance or possessions; Discrimination/harassment via education; Economic harassment via fines
Political and Legal	Imprisonment by government; Travel bans/restrictions on movement
Security	Abduction; Forced out of home – expulsion; Forced to flee town/country; Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Trafficking; Violence – death; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Denied access to social community/networks; Denied communal resources; Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

Christian men have always faced a higher level of threats and violence in regions of armed conflict, partly because they represent the head of the family (or of the church, if they are pastors or priests). As the providers for the family, men face being extorted to provide finances for armed groups. Non-church leaders face the risk of being killed, while pastors or priests may be physically assaulted, extorted for financial gain, forced to leave their regions, or even killed. Exemplifying these dangers, in March 2021, the Bishop of Buenaventura, Rubén Darío Jaramillo, reported that he had been threatened by armed groups with the use of explosives for denouncing violence and drug trafficking in the region (Verdad en Libertad, 8 February 2022) This is one of many such cases.

Within some indigenous communities in particular, converts to 'non-accepted forms of Christianity' face extreme pressure. They may be beaten, harassed, threatened or sent away to do forced labor in a different territory. "Indigenous converts must live in absolute secrecy because if they join churches or make their faith public, they are at risk of being tortured, expelled, incarcerated, and even their families may run the same risk," a country expert explained.

Christian men and boys are also exposed to abduction, forced recruitment and violence at the hands of criminal armed groups. They are subject to indoctrination and mandatory participation in the activities of these groups which may include perpetrating abductions, surveillance activities, sexual abuse, killings and trafficking. Not only is there a high risk of recruitment for combat purposes for men, but also "for the transport of illicit substances and weapons," a coun-

try expert explained: "In most cases, armed groups convince children by offering them money or food, taking advantage of their socioeconomic conditions related to poverty, inequality and lack of opportunities." According to the International Crisis Group (ICG), there was a dramatic increase in the [recruitment of children](#) into armed groups in 2020, in part due to an exploitation of the COVID-19 crisis by criminals, who reinforced their territorial control while state resources were diverted in tackling the pandemic (ICG, 6 December 2021).

In light of threats and reprisals, many see forced recruitment as an "inescapable destiny," one expert explained. Even if the children are able to escape the clutches of these gangs, they will face life-long threats from former gang-members and risk abduction in the future. The forced recruitment of Christian men and boys also impacts women and the strength of the family unit, as she must raise children alone and survive economically. As an expert shared: "This type of situation fosters structural poverty in areas under the control of organized crime and due to the need to provide basic goods to the family, children must leave the school, which makes it much easier to convince them to continue the criminal life."

## Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2021):

- "The Confederation of Jewish Communities of Colombia (CJCC) continued to express concern about antisemitic rhetoric and actions on social media after the CJCC met with a presidential candidate in May [2021] as part of a series of meetings with all presidential candidates. For example, social media included comments stating the Jewish community was 'conspiring with communism' and committing 'treason against the homeland'."



## Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

### Organized corruption and crime

Citizens are uncertain how the political course of the country will develop under the new government. The political instability is certainly not favorable for halting the advance of criminal groups that have an increasing presence and influence in the country, especially in rural and border areas. While criminal groups increase and diversify, society in general - and especially members who highlight problematic social issues - suffer the serious consequences of the terror that they spread with impunity and corruption. Christians, who continue to work in the defense of human rights, the fight against drugs or for the promotion of a culture of peace, find themselves facing worsening levels of pressure and violence. This is likely to continue as they are not considered by the government and society to be particularly vulnerable.

### Clan oppression

As it stands, the state has not yet provided any effective solution for protecting the individual dimension of the right to religious freedom for indigenous community members who decide to convert to Christianity and not follow traditional ethnic rites. The increased power of indigenous leadership and autonomy since the COVID-19 crisis began has reinforced the obstacles for indigenous Christians to live their faith in freedom; these Christians face the neglect of government authorities and the creation of alliances between ethnic leaders and criminal groups.

### Secular intolerance

Colombia is becoming a major center for hostility towards Christian faith in the Latin American region. Although it does not always manifest itself in a violent way, intolerance towards faith-based political participation and towards public expressions of traditional Christian faith in general is clearly increasing and provoking self-censorship. Despite the central government's recognition of the religious sector as being an important element within society, Christian leaders are likely to continue being ignored by many government officials and pressure groups, when decisions are made relating to issues such as abortion, marriage and family. This situation will not improve as long as the right to freedom of expression and religious freedom is not fully guaranteed by the authorities.

## External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: Illegal Armed Groups - <https://colombiareports.com/amp/colombia-illegal-armed-groups-maps/>
- Persecution engines description: fight for control - <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/092-fight-other-means-keeping-peace-colombias-farc>
- Persecution engines description: disputed - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/28/colombia/venezuela-border-area-abuses-armed-groups>
- Persecution engines description: de facto authorities - [https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20220218\\_acaps\\_mire\\_thematic\\_report\\_colombia\\_confinements\\_0.pdf](https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20220218_acaps_mire_thematic_report_colombia_confinements_0.pdf)
- Persecution engines description: to act with impunity - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/16/colombians-call-for-end-to-impunity-as-activist-killings-continue>

- Persecution engines description: electoral period - <https://insightcrime.org/news/colombia-criminal-groups-preparing-presidential-elections/>
- Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere: Coexistence manuals - <https://www.mineducacion.gov.co/portal/Preescolar-basica-y-media/Proyectos-de-Calidad/322486:Ley-de-Convivencia-Escolar>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: continue - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/colombia#23f1a9>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: affected - <https://colombia.unwomen.org/es/onu-mujeres-en-colombia/las-mujeres-en-colombia>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: USDS, 2022 Trafficking in Person Report: Colombia, 2022 - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-trafficking-in-persons-report/colombia/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: recruitment of children - <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/lockdowns-produced-new-generation-child-soldiers>

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the new Research & Reports page on the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>. As in previous years, these continue to be available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) using the following links:

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Colombia>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Latin-America-Organized-corruption-and-crime-2018.pdf>