

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

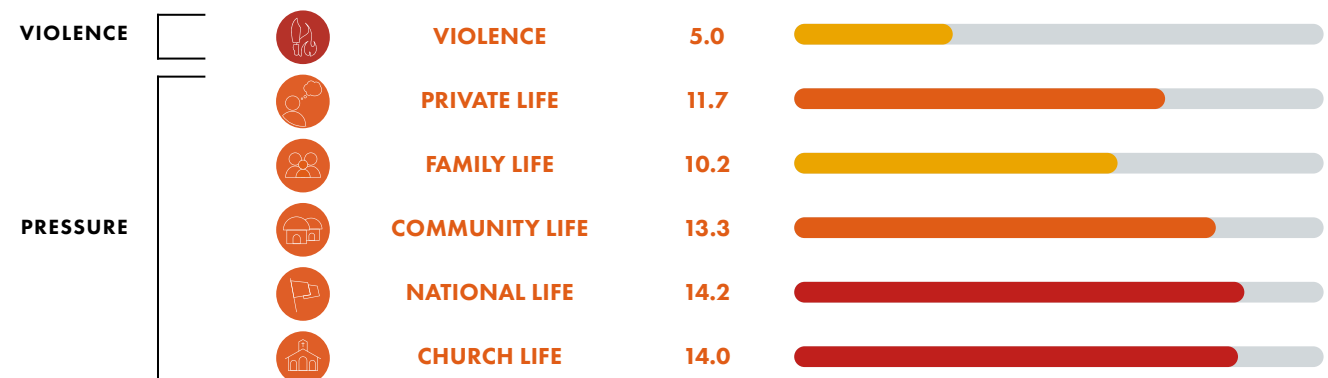
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**31**

## Laos



### LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

## Key findings

The Communist government maintains an absolute grip on power but has set up training programs on freedom of religion for local authorities, as most problems occur on a local level. Authorities heavily monitor all Christian activities, including those of the registered church. An estimated 75% of all government-approved Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) congregations do not have permanent buildings and worship in homes. These are considered 'illegal gatherings' by the government and must operate in secret, although the LEC umbrella gives some protection. Seen as traitors to the Buddhist-animist community, converts to Christianity often suffer severe human rights violations from family, community, religious leaders and mainly local-level state authorities. They may be expelled from their community or even imprisoned.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Thongloun Sisoulit

### POPULATION

7,481,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

207,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Buddhism

### GOVERNMENT

Communist State



above should be understood as overlapping. The country is still in the tight grip of the Communist Party; therefore, religion is something the authorities view as hostile and needs to be controlled. While Buddhism is accepted as being part of the country's heritage, to a certain extent, Christianity is seen as being foreign, especially in the villages, linked with Western values and an enemy of Communism.

## How the situation varies by region

Provinces like Luang Namtha, Phongsaly and Houphan in the north (where the Hmong and Khmu minorities are concentrated), Khammouane, Savannakhet in central Laos and Salavan in the south have traditionally been places where Christians experience violations from local authorities.

## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	207,000	2.8
Buddhists	4,004,000	53.5
Ethno-religionists	3,112,000	41.6
Agnostics	62,900	0.8

Source<sup>2</sup>

Laos is a unitary Marxist-Leninist republic that has been governed by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party since 1975. International observers have routinely characterized the country's human rights record as exceptionally poor, due to restrictions on civil liberties and persecution of minorities. Despite economic reforms in the 1980s, the country remains extremely poor and heavily dependent on foreign aid, which has steadily and increasingly been provided by China, thereby making Laos all the more dependent on China for infrastructural needs and in terms of debt too.

According to World Christian Database 2022 estimates, 53.5% of the population are Buddhist, mainly following the Theravada teachings. 41.9% adhere to ethnic religions (Chinese folk not included) related to their ethnic or tribal ancestry. These are similar to religions practiced in Thailand. Several folk traditions have been incorporated into Buddhism, so the numbers given

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriate Christians generally are not allowed to mix with local churches. However, they were permitted to join two Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) churches in the capital, Vientiane. Expatriate Christians include communities of diplomatic staff and face restrictions, for example, through the police monitoring system.

### Historical Christian communities

Historical Christian communities include the Roman Catholic Church, LEC and Seventh Day Adventists. Although officially recognized by the authorities, they are heavily monitored. In the case of the LEC, there is a tacit understanding that the authorities in some areas play a part in selecting leaders and approving Christian materials for print.

### Converts to Christianity

Converts to Christianity from Buddhism or Animism face the highest levels of pressure and violence from local authorities, families and the wider community. Conversion is seen as a potential threat to government authority and a betrayal of family and community unity. In response, police often act quickly and with a heavy hand to repress Christian groups reported to have been spreading their faith.

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

<sup>2</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

### Non-traditional Christian communities

Non-traditional Christian communities include Evangelicals, Pentecostals and Lutherans. As the government does not allow ‘illegal’ gatherings, these groups need to register under one of the three government-recognized churches mentioned under Historical Christian communities. Unregistered churches must meet in secret.

## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Communist oppression, blended with Dictatorial paranoia:

Laos is one of five remaining Marxist-Leninist countries in the world. However, faithful adherence to Communist ideology is pronounced only in a few provinces and villages. These areas faithful to the Communist ideology are strictly opposed to any influence deemed foreign or Western, including Christianity. Local authorities will often take advantage of society’s hostile attitudes towards Christians to justify actions against them.

### Clan oppression:

Animism and other tribal practices are observed throughout the country, especially in rural areas. Abandoning tribal practices for Christianity is seen as a betrayal of family and wider community identity. Village leaders and family members often force Christians to renounce their faith or expel them from their communities so as not to anger the community’s traditional spirits.

## How are men and women differently affected

### **WOMEN**

Violence against women is culturally widely accepted. Girls may experience discrimination and harassment at school, and female Christian leaders may be arrested. Women can suffer economically and emotionally from the persecution of men, especially when their husbands are arrested and detained. Converts face the greatest pressures, which include mockery, isolation and denial of communal resources (such as water) within their local communities. Within the family setting, they might also be beaten or disowned.

- Denied access to social community / networks
- Imprisonment by the government
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

### **MEN**

Church leadership tends to be dominated by men, a role that has become frequently targeted. Pastors are vulnerable to attacks on churches and to incarceration by the authorities. Considerable amounts of money must be paid for their release, and leaders report harsh and degrading treatment whilst detained. Christians face workplace persecution and discrimination, exclusion from government and military roles, and job loss. Within schools, boys are more likely to face physical beatings and harassment, and drug addiction is a present threat.

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



## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	31	68
2022	26	69
2021	22	71
2020	20	72
2019	19	71

The drop in score of 0.6 points in WWL 2023 compared to WWL 2022 was caused by fewer cases of violence being reported (almost one point). However, it should be noted that right after the end of the reporting period for WWL 2023, reports of a Christian pastor killed for his faith emerged. This shows that violence against Christians is still taking place on a substantial level. The pressure exerted on Christians by (mainly local) state authorities and a very strong pressure on converts from family, friends, neighbors and the local authorities did not cease. By putting very high pressure on Christians, Laos follows the example set by other countries still ruled by Communist parties - especially its big neighbor, China.

## Examples of violence in the reporting period

- February 2022:** A family of 12 Christians was attacked, and their house was burnt down in Dong Savanh village in Savannakhet province. Villagers were angry that this family followed a 'foreign religion'. The attack came after villagers prohibited the burial of the father of the family in the local cemetery in December 2021. A month after the attack, the family was still living in the forest and had been ordered by local authorities not to publish video footage of the case.

WWL Year	Christians internally displaced	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained
2023	35	0	4	18
2022	83	1	3	19

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10\*, 100\* or 1000\*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.

### Private life

Christian converts either from Buddhism or ethnic religion need to keep their faith secret. If discovered, village elders (*pho ban* or *nai ban*) and their assistants threaten Christians with expulsion. Many Lao believe that they are protected by *phi* (spirits) and fear offending the spirits. Christians are given a deadline to recant and not doom the village. They are put under pressure, and if this does not work, Christians are violently expelled.

under pressure to conform; children can be forced by school or the community to attend Buddhist temple services and practice associated rituals. Christians in devout Buddhist areas are discriminated against in many areas of their lives, such as being denied admission to education and jobs. Christians are hindered, or in some cases arrested, for holding Christian funerals. Even rural churches registered under the LEC are unable to openly carry out baptisms in the country.

### Family life

Buddhist teachings and animist practices and beliefs are considered part of Lao identity. Christians are

### Community life

There is immense community pressure on Christians. In provinces like Luang Namtha, Phongsaly and

Houphan in the north and Savannakhet in the central, local authorities, especially village leaders, harass, monitor, arrest and evict Christians. Police require the church to provide personal information such as photos, phone numbers, and addresses of both clergy and laity to facilitate state monitoring. Christians discovered within public service (including the military) are either dismissed or passed over for promotion. The pensions of Christians who have retired from government service can be cut.

### National life

Although the Lao Constitution stipulates freedom of religion, this right is not respected. Communist

government officials apply pressure, but the majority of violations occur at the local level from rural village leaders. These local leaders are concerned primarily with preserving ethnic practices and maintaining the Communist bureaucracy to some extent.

### Church life

Many church activities require approval from the government, as stipulated in [Decree 315](#). Both secret and uniformed police attend services, count the number of people attending, and take notes on the sermons. The government is slightly more tolerant of religious practices in urban areas, but has often acted severely in rural areas.

## International obligations & rights violated

Laos 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 \(CRC\)](#)

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

- Christian communities and their activities are closely monitored by the authorities (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christians face discrimination in employment because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Christian children are forced to receive Buddhist religious education and to participate in religious ceremonies and festivals that are not in line with their religious beliefs (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- The state imposes strict limitations on Christian meetings that go beyond the internationally recognized and permitted limitations (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 21)
- Christians are attacked and expelled from their community for sharing about their faith (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Christians are killed because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 6.1)
- Christians are imprisoned for their faith (ICCPR Art. 9)

## Situation of other religious minorities

Buddhists outside of mainstream Buddhist teaching sometimes face problems when registering monks. Among the ethnic communities, the Hmong (often animists or Christians) in some areas have faced the greatest oppression from the government. Muslims, Hindus and adherents of Baha'i also form tiny minorities in the country, which face pressure from Communist state authorities.



A literacy class run by Open Doors' partners in rural Laos.

### Open Doors in Laos

Open Doors works through local church partners to come alongside Lao believers when they suffer persecution for choosing to follow Christ. Physical attacks and expulsion from their families and communities are the common forms of oppression they encounter. Our interventions include presence, relief, practical aid and advocacy. Open Doors also works through local partners to strengthen persecuted believers in Laos through the following efforts:

- Provision of Christian materials
- Leadership training
- Discipleship programs
- Socio-economic development programs

#### About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

*Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

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