

WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
47

Kazakhstan



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).¹ Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

Key findings

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

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

Quick facts

LEADER

President Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev

POPULATION

18,957,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

847,000 (25.6%)²

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic

Religious affairs legislation introduced in September 2011 included religious communities needing to re-register, a ban on unregistered religious activity, restricted production and dissemination of religious materials in-country, and a prohibition on religious activities for children such as summer camps. [The authorities](#) raid services, punish speech 'inciting religious discord' and detain individuals for 'illegal missionary activity'. Since 2019, the right to freedom of religion or belief has been [more](#) respected, with the government abandoning proposed amendments that would have tightened the 2011 legislation. Religious Freedom Roundtables with minority groups have been held and administrative prosecutions for religious offences are declining.

Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	4,847,000	25.6
Muslims	13,477,000	71.1
Atheists	75,600	0.4
Agnostics	479,000	2.5

Source³

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

Sunni Islam is the main religion and Kazakhs are expected to be Muslims. This makes life challenging for converts to Christianity, especially in rural areas. However, it would be wrong to call Kazakhstan a Muslim country. Most Kazakhs follow the traditions rather than teachings of Islam and 70 years of Soviet atheism have left their mark; the government is staunchly secular. A large Russian minority in the north is the reason why Kazakhstan has the largest number of Christians in Central Asia; over 90% of Christians in Kazakhstan belong to the Russian Orthodox Church.

How the situation varies by region

Rights violations targeting Christian communities and carried out by government officials can occur all over the country. Pressure from the Muslim environment on converts is more intensive outside the major cities.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Expat Christians are not isolated from other Christian groups.

Historical Christian communities

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

Converts to Christianity

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

Non-traditional Christian communities

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

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

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Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Dictatorial paranoia:

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

Islamic oppression blended with clan oppression:

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

experience reflects this socio-cultural structure. They risk interrogation, fines, detention and imprisonment. Obligatory military service for young men is an extra potential risk as a highly controlled environment in a Muslim-majority state. Converts from a Muslim background experience pressure from their families, typically facing verbal harassment and physical beatings. Job loss is also a risk for converts and church leaders, which then affects their dependent families.

- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Economic harassment via fines
- Imprisonment by government
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Travel bans/restrictions on movement
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological
- Violence - verbal

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution score out of 100
2022	47	63.90
2021	41	64.09
2020	35	63.53
2019	34	63.23
2018	28	62.58

Kazakhstan scored the same as in WWL 2021: 64 points. Practically nothing has changed regarding the situation of Christians. Pressure is at a very high level in the 'private' and 'church' spheres of life. These are indications of the two dominant persecution engines in Kazakhstan: Islamic oppression and Dictatorial paranoia. Muslim families, friends and villagers exert pressure especially on converts, while the government imposes many restrictions on the functioning of Christian churches.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

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

- Abduction
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Violence - physical
- Violence - verbal

MEN

Men tend to have higher levels of responsibility in the public sphere; the religious persecution that men

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **Between January to August 2021**, at least eight Christians were detained mostly for distributing Christian literature during the COVID-19 restricted measures.
- 31 converts (both men and women) faced harassment such as physical and mental abuse at the hands of their Muslim relatives and communities. Most were living in rural areas.
- At least one pastor’s house was damaged during a raid conducted by state officials in **January 2021**.

WWL Year	Christians detained	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians’ private property damaged or confiscated	Christians’ business property damaged or confiscated
2022	8	31	1	1
2021	10	0	0	0

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

Private life

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

Family life

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

Community life

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

National life

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

Church life

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



International obligations & rights violated

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

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

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

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

Situation of other religious minorities

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



Open Doors in Kazakhstan

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

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



About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2021 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- The full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology, as well as the complete WWL 2022 ranking and reports, can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
