

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**13**

## Sudan



### 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).<sup>1</sup> Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

## Key findings

The situation for Christians is currently defined by three things. First, the perception and pledge that the Sudanese government has moved away from the old repressive laws and policies, but with implementation lacking. According to local experts, the international narrative about Sudan is eclipsing reality on the ground. Secondly, communities' perception of Christians hasn't changed since the fall of the al-Bashir regime in the country. Christians are afraid of speaking out about their faith for fear of being targeted by radical groups. Converts and ethnic African Christians in particular face severe violations. Finally, the Janjaweed militias are still very active in the country, adding to the levels of pressure and fear.

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

## Quick facts

### LEADER

Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok

### POPULATION

44,592,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

1,984,000 (4.4%)<sup>2</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	1,984,000	4.4
Muslims	40,989,000	91.9
Ethno-religionists	1,137,000	2.5
Agnostics	410,000	0.9

Source<sup>3</sup>

Sudan is one of the most complex countries in Africa. The Darfur crisis that led to the indictment of former President al-Bashir and other senior government officials, the civil war that led to the independence of South Sudan and the plight of Nuba people have defined Sudan on the international scene. In 2011, South Sudan became an independent nation.

In April 2019, President Omar al-Bashir was ousted and a new transitional government was established with the aim of paving the way for democracy in the next three to four years. The Transitional Council was led by the army, to transition to civilian leadership until elections were to be held. However, the process was interrupted when on 25 October, just outside of the reporting period, the military performed a coup leading to weeks of civil unrest that had not dissipated at the time of publication.

Demographically, the country is majority-Muslim and

Christians have been systematically persecuted for decades. Under former President al-Bashir, religious police and armed Islamic militias were persecuting Christians. The system was so repressive for freedom of religion that Sudan was designated as a country of particular concern by the US state department for over two decades. There are also different armed groups in the country. The change in the government's policy has not produced change in the attitude in the society. Society at large sees Sudanese national identity as an integral part of Islam.

## How the situation varies by region

In 1956, when Sudan became independent, the predominantly Muslim Arab population was concentrated in the north. The Arab-led government failed to create a federal system inclusive of animists and Christians in the south, which led to civil war. In the 1980s, Sharia law was imposed nationwide leading to public lashings for pre-marital sex and alcohol consumption as well as amputations for theft. After several decades of war, a peace conference eventually led to South Sudan's independence referendum in 2011. Nevertheless, large minority groups of non-Arab non-Muslims still live within Sudan's borders. These groups are concentrated in the south and are mostly made up of Christian ethnic Africans. Churches have been demolished and many

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

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

Christians have been attacked indiscriminately in areas such as the Nuba Mountains, where government forces and rebel groups are in conflict.

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriates are being forced to close their churches. These are groups mainly from western countries and South Sudan. Their churches have been denied registration and many have faced demolition. Some expatriate Christians face arrest and detention without due process of law.

### Historical Christian communities

Christians belonging to historical churches such as the Coptic Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches face violations due to both Islamic oppression and dictatorial paranoia. Former President al-Bashir had a program of church demolition, which included churches belonging to historical Christian communities.

### Converts to Christianity

This group, which consists mainly of Christians with a Muslim background, experiences the most intense pressure and violence.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

Sudanese Christians who belong to Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal denominations experience violations in the form of Islamic oppression and dictatorial paranoia. This group is also facing the prospect of having most of its churches in the country closed down.



## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Islamic oppression:

The Muslim Brotherhood's ideology has had immense influence in Sudan's government since a coup in 1989 installed President al-Bashir as leader. The regime subsequently worked towards forming an Islamic state at the expense of other religious groups in the country. It was accused of supporting radical Islamic militants (including sheltering Osama Bin Laden), sponsoring and harboring terrorism and trafficking weapons.

### Dictatorial paranoia:

Sudan has struggled to maintain civil order since its independence more than six decades ago. While the independence conflict with the south looks like it is finally coming to a close, the Darfur crisis, a multipolar civil war between pro- and anti-government militias, continues. In the past, government leaders have used inflammatory anti-Western rhetoric as a means to strengthen the regime in Khartoum. This has led to increased anti-Christian violence as the government views Christians as agents of the West.

### Organized corruption and crime:

The government of Sudan under President al-Bashir employed all means available to stay in power, including the mobilization of tribal militias. Many of these militias committed human rights violations including human trafficking of non-Arabs as a means to profit from the conflict. Christians, viewed as both foreign and a threat to the nation, were targeted with particular brutality by these Islamist groups.

### Clan oppression:

The Sudanese population consists of about 19 different ethnic groups of mostly Arab origin in the north, and African origin to the south. The Arabs have, since gaining their independence, pursued a policy of Islamic and Arab superiority and nationalism.

# How are men and women differently affected?

## WOMEN

Under the transitional government there have been positive changes impacting women’s rights and safety. In July 2020, it was announced that the apostasy law would be eliminated, that women would no longer require a permit from a male relative to travel, and that female genital mutilation (FGM) would be banned. Notwithstanding these positive developments, female Christians, particularly converts, continue to face tremendous challenges. They are vulnerable to rape, forced marriage and domestic violence. Converts may be isolated within the home to reduce the embarrassment and shame of the conversion on the family.

- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Violence - sexual

## MEN

Men and boys remain targets of forced recruitment into militias, where they are forced to fight. The Sudanese government also targets male Christians with various false charges, including ‘terrorism’. Church leaders are the most frequent targets and government security forces monitor their activities daily. Christian men and boys, particularly converts, are vulnerable to beatings, imprisonment, killing, harassment within the workplace and displacement. Converts may be kicked out of their house and

shunned by their families. Others feel forced to leave their home due to the pressure of persecution.

- False charges
- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by government
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Violence - death
- Violence - physical

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution score out of 100
2022	13	79.00
2021	13	78.91
2020	7	85.40
2019	6	86.53
2018	4	86.64

*Sudan scored 79, the same point in WWL 2021. Sudan dropped six points in WWL 2021 due to the change in policy and legal framework by the transitional government. However, in WWL 2022, even though the violence dropped by 0.5 point, the overall score remains the same. The average pressure on Christians and churches is still at an extremely high level; the churches which were forced to close down have not been re-opened. Christians are still deprived of their rights in many ways, and the government has continued to take legal action against certain church leaders.*



# Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **On 3 January 2021**, a church building belonging to the Sudanese Church of Christ (SCOC) in Tamboul, Gezira state, was burned down.
- **In February 2021**, Christians who protested against the burning of the Sudanese Church of Christ in January were beaten by masked men.
- A Sunday program broadcasted by the Sudan National Broadcasting Corporation is being used as rallying cry to accuse Christians of corrupting the nation.
- Bibles were held at ports of entry.

WWL Year	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians' private property damaged or confiscated
2022	10	1	100	10
2021	9	0	100	525

*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

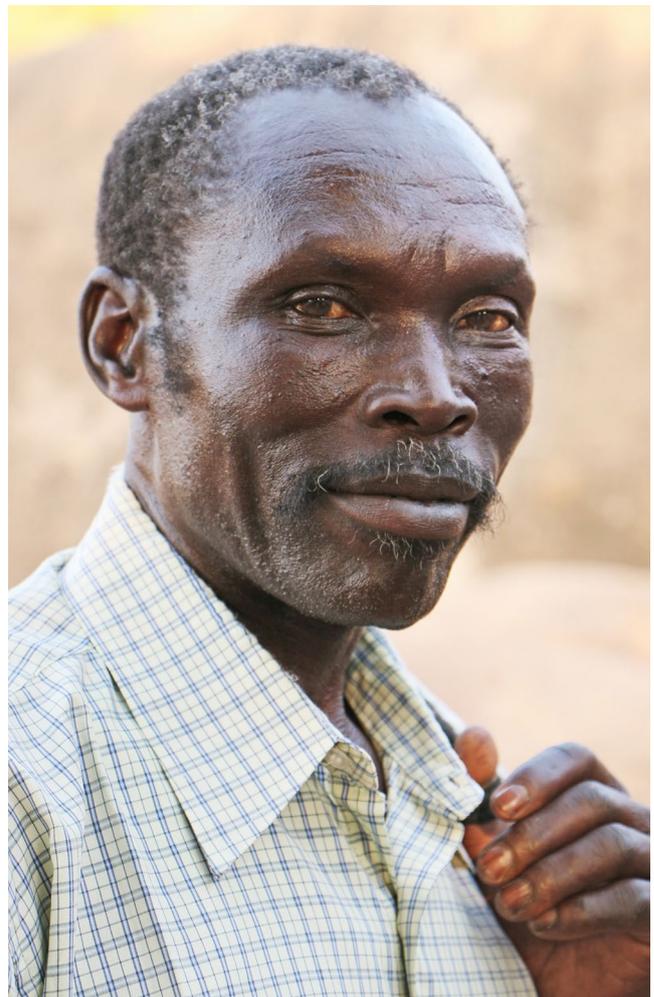
Christians avoid openly discussing their faith with the local community for safety reasons; it can lead to government arrest or attack from Islamic militants. This social pressure is reinforced by constant surveillance by community and police. Keeping Christian materials, such as Bibles, carries significant risk, especially for converts within a Muslim family. If discovered, Christians face severe pressure to return to Islam. If they resist, they risk loss of property, expulsion from the community and further acts of violence.

## Family life

Attempting to raise a Christian family in Sudan is difficult given the pressure from government, community and civil violence. Because Christians are in the minority and Muslims exert so much pressure on social norms, a Christian marrying a Muslim is expected to convert to Islam. Christian children are often harassed due to their family's faith and converts raising Christian children might lose custody of them. Additionally, the government requires school teaching on Islam.

## Community life

The communal pressure on Christians in Sudan is immense. Public order laws, based largely on the government's strict interpretation of Islamic law, are in force in Khartoum. These laws prohibit 'indecent dresses' and other 'offenses of honor, reputation,



and public morality'. Police have been known to harass and arrest Christians for arbitrary violations using this pretext. Christian communities struggle to access community resources (such as clean drinking water). This is particularly true outside urban areas. The general attitude in society and the government is that Sudanese citizens should be Muslim. The government uses all available opportunities to downgrade and punish Christians by restricting them from using community resources. Christians in the Nuba Mountains and other areas in the south face aerial bombardment from government forces. State-sponsored militia are also known to carry out house searches looking for Christians.

### National life

Christians, especially those from South Sudan and Western missionaries, are frequently monitored by government security forces. There is great hope that this will change, as was made public by the transitional government. Hindrance and bans occur where organizations are perceived to be critical of state institutions or are overt about the evangelistic effect of their work; many international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are barred from the country if known to be Christian.

### Church life

Churches are under significant strain in Sudan from the authorities and broader society. At the top, Sudanese officials constantly interfere in the selection of religious leaders. Christians are obstructed from building and maintaining their churches by authorities and mobs. Attempting to make repairs without the consent of the government makes Christians liable to violence. Multiple attacks have been incited by community leaders goading the people into riots, bombings and attacks against Christians and their churches. Such violence is more common in remote areas. Sudan's infrastructure makes reaching these areas with aid and international observers extremely difficult, which enables perpetrators to carry out violence with impunity.



## International obligations & rights violated

Sudan 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 on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

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

- Church buildings are attacked and burnt down (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian women and girls are harassed for not covering their head or wearing trousers (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians can be accused and charged of blasphemy (ICCPR Art. 19)
- Christian children are often harassed due to their parents' faith (CRC Art. 14 and ICCPR Art. 18)



## Situation of other religious minorities

Other religious minorities such as the Jewish community also face serious challenges in Sudan. They are targeted by political and religious leaders over television and other forms of media. The Bahai community is not recognized in the country and can only operate in secret. Jehovah's Witnesses also face harassment. [Shia Muslims](#) are not allowed to hold worship services (USCIRF, 2019). In summary, any religious group apart from Sunni Islam faces tremendous challenges to exercise their faith.



### Open Doors in Sudan

Open Doors' vision for Sudan is to see resilient church that stands strong in the face of persecution and is economically empowered to support itself, through:

- Persecution preparedness programs
- Enhancing discipleship
- Facilitating economic empowerment

#### 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.*

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