

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
24

Central African Republic



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 Central African Republic (CAR) has been embroiled in conflict since 2013 and most of the country is occupied by armed militia groups, responsible for a range of human rights abuses. Christian leaders who have publicly denounced the violence have been threatened, and church buildings have been burned and ransacked. Some Christians left their homes and fled to neighboring countries like Cameroon. The conflict has resulted in the displacement of thousands of Christians, who have been forced to live in camps and lose their homes and livelihoods. Converts to Christianity also face violations from their immediate family members. Particularly in the northern part of the country, the local community often ostracizes Christian converts and also tries to force them to renounce Christianity through violence.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Faustin Archange Touadera

POPULATION

5,017,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

3,712,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	3,712,000	74.0
Muslims	697,000	13.9
Ethno-religionists	559,000	11.1
Agnostics	36,300	0.7

Source²

Since its independence in 1960, the CAR has been mired in violence driven by overlapping tensions between armed groups, religious and ethnic groups, and herders and farmers. The mainly Muslim group, Séléka, staged a coup in 2013 that gave rise to deadly conflict along religious and ethnic lines. Since President Touadera was elected in 2016, he has made reconciliation his priority, and a Political Peace Agreement was signed in 2019. However, there are still some clashes involving the mainly Muslim ex-Séléka splinters and the self-defense group, called the anti-Balaka. Although the anti-Balaka is frequently referred to as Christian, they mostly follow African Traditional Religions (ATR) and churches have strongly disassociated themselves.

The [2016 Constitution](#) provides for freedom of religion, and this is generally respected in practice.

Relations between Muslims and Christians have appeared good on the surface, but there are some tensions. In particular, converts from Islam to Christianity face violations, and Christians living in Muslim-dominated areas have reported discrimination and attacks on churches by ex-Séléka groups. Anti-Balaka rebel groups also attack churches and any Christians who oppose their activities. Many women and girls are economically dependent on their families, which can make them vulnerable if they convert to Christianity. At the end of 2020, the environment became even more complex when several groups that used to be at war, united in the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC) under former ruler Françoise Bozize. These CPC tried to disrupt elections after the constitutional court ruled that the latter was not allowed to contest those elections. The CPS and the original groups continue to hold societies captive through violence and extortion.

How the situation varies by region

Rights violations against Christians are most severe in the northern and eastern parts of the country, which is dominated by the Muslim population and where Séléka splinter groups are operating. There are also difficulties for Christians in the eastern part of the country, bordering Sudan.

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

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

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

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

Historical Christian communities

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest denomination in the country with the widest network of churches, clinics, and schools. During and after the Séléka coup, many of their churches were looted. The Catholic Church has been a strong voice calling for peace and reconciliation and has also provided places of refuge for civilians, both Muslim and Christian, fleeing attack. As a result, Catholic churches have often been targeted for attack.

Converts to Christianity

Converts with a Muslim background experience opposition and pressure from family members to renounce Christianity if their conversion becomes known. Most do not worship in public due to the fear of attacks by Muslim agitators, especially in the northern Muslim-dominated areas of the country.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Evangelical and Pentecostal communities have been subject to attacks by ex-Séléka militants. Recently, the number of people joining these Christian congregations has increased dramatically.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression:

Besides the violence against Christians perpetrated particularly by the offshoots of the Séléka militia, Islamic oppression is also evident in the persecution of Christians by society in general in predominantly Muslim parts of the country.

Organized corruption and crime:

This persecution engine is particularly evident where Anti-Balaka militants attack churches and Christians. Although Anti-Balaka began as a collection of vigilante groups, they have morphed into criminal gangs. Particularly in Bangui, they have often targeted Christians and church leaders, especially those who do not subscribe to their ideals or those who oppose their violent activities. While the group claims to protect Christians, it has become evident over the years that this is untrue, since they attack Muslims and Christians alike.

Ethno-religious hostility blended with Clan oppression:

There are two dimensions to this persecution engine – i) Animism/ATR (religious and/or cultural) and ii) tribal fighting. In CAR, ethnic and religious motives often go together. Some ethnic minority groups are specifically targeted, for instance, Ba'aka pygmies are forcibly recruited for labor. Anti-Balaka groups sometimes force Christians into their ranks.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Years of violence and political instability have left Christian women and girls particularly vulnerable to rape, displacement, abduction, and forced marriage as forms of religious persecution. Sexual abuse results in shame, trauma, and often pregnancy, with high rates of sexual violence discouraging parents in high-risk areas from sending girls to school. Dependence on family means family-driven persecution affects women more, with financial need also being a significant factor. In Muslim-dominated areas, women are pressured to follow an Islamic dress code, and converts face house arrest and forced marriage to older Muslims.

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community / networks
- Discrimination / harassment via education
- Economic harassment via fines
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced marriage
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Targeted seduction
- Trafficking
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

MEN

Men are killed for their faith or detained by radical militias. Pastors are especially targeted, falsely accused, and even attacked during church services. Men are also discriminated against in jobs, as Islamic leaders occupy all marketplaces, control trade, impose large taxes on Christian businessmen, and even loot Christian shops to keep them in poverty. Christians are forcibly recruited into rebel militant groups, discriminated against in national military service, and

targeted for torture and assault. Abduction, killing, threats and the tactical impoverishment of men greatly affects Christian families.

- Abduction
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Imprisonment by the government
- Military / militia conscription / service against conscience
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	24	70
2022	31	68
2021	35	66
2020	25	68
2019	21	70

WWL 2023 saw an increase of 2 points due to the ongoing conflict in the country affecting Christians at all levels. There are more than 14 factions fighting against the government and against each other. The Rwandan and Russian Wagner groups also joined the fighting, making life for Christians more challenging. According to many credible reports, various fighting groups, including government security forces, have committed atrocities. In the middle of this, Christians are extremely affected. The government controls only the capital city, Bangui. The rest of the country is divided into different factions. These factors have also made the tracking of persecution more complex. The score for violence remained at an extreme level, which has impacted pressure in all spheres of life.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Many churches were damaged in the context of the conflict between different factions. For example, on January 22, 2022. The Union of Evangelical Churches of the brothers (UEEF) was the target of an armed attack from elements of the rebel group of 3R.
- Properties and houses of Christians have been damaged.

WWL Year	Christians abducted	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Christians forced to marry	Christians killed
2023	35	66	20	69
2022	10*	10*	10*	29

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

Converts to Christianity from Islam experience severe violations from family members if their conversion becomes known. Financial help can be cut off. In the Muslim-dominated north, where Séléka splinter groups operate, converts risk their lives if they own Christian materials. When ex-Séléka fighters come into a house and find someone reading a Bible, they have been known to kill them immediately.

Family life

Often, after a spouse has converted to Christianity, extended families and the local community will put pressure on the non-convert to divorce. In addition, converts almost automatically lose family inheritance rights. In areas controlled by rebel groups, where children's parents have been killed or have been forced to flee, any children left behind remain at the mercy of the attackers. Some have been brutally killed.

Community life

The government has lost effective control over many areas. In Muslim-dominated areas, Christians are often discriminated against, especially where Sharia law is more or less officially implemented. Monitoring by some rebel groups and their supporters has been common. In some instances, there are some vigilante groups that monitor for jihadists. In the context of the ongoing conflict, Christians (especially young girls) suffer from attacks and abductions. Muslim community members usually do not want to share community resources (such as healthcare) with converts to Christianity, especially in the remote northern part of the country.

National life

In areas controlled by ex-Séléka militants, all transportation facilities are under Muslim control, making movement for Christians difficult. When violence flares up, pastors are particularly vulnerable when travelling between churches to carry out their work. In regions where rebel groups wield power, Christians are discriminated against and sometimes attacked, forcing them to flee home and country.

Church life

Although there is no official surveillance from the government, civilians are watched by various rebel groups to discover their possible links to other groups. Many attacks have been reported, with church services being interrupted and churches burned.



International obligations & rights violated

CAR 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)

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

- Christian converts in Muslim-majority areas experience pressure and violence from their family and community to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians and their activities are monitored by rebel groups (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

According to the US State Department's [IRF 2021 report](#): "14 persons were killed on February 16 at a mosque in Bambari when pro-government forces recaptured the city from the CPC. During this assault, Wagner Group forces and soldiers from the national military – the Central African Armed Forces (FACA) – reportedly raped, tortured, and killed Muslim civilians. Imams in Bangui stated that Muslim internally displaced people (IDPs) had been victims of torture, rape, extrajudicial killing, disappearance, and theft at the hands of FACA and Wagner Group forces."

In the context of the ongoing conflict, religious minorities are not the main targets. However, adherents of small religious minorities do face challenges in the communities where they live.



Open Doors in Central African Republic

Open Doors, through local partners and churches, has been involved in CAR for a number of years. From 2013, our programs provided support to the church in crisis following the coup by the Islam-dominated Séléka forces. Our vision for CAR is a church that is mature, autonomous, and able to deal with trauma and persecution. Our programs include:

- Persecution preparedness
- Economic empowerment
- Trauma care

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.
