

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
43

Malaysia



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

Those who leave Islam, including those who become Christians, experience pressure and violence, as every ethnic Malay is expected to be Muslim. Leaving Islam not only violates the Constitution, but also familial and societal norms. Roman Catholics, Methodists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are watched by the authorities. However, non-traditional Protestant groups are more often targeted, as these tend to be more active in talking about their faith.

Quick facts

LEADER

King Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah

POPULATION

33,181,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

3,054,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Federal Parliamentary Constitutional Monarchy

the ‘Bumiputra’ (people of the soil, or in other words, the Malay population).

The [Malaysian Constitution](#) defines ‘Malay’ as a follower of Islam. There are frequent warnings from Muslim-Malay organizations and politicians against a supposed agenda of [Christianization](#). Malaysia’s legal system and its political institutions are strongly influenced by Islam. All children in state-run schools are required to attend Islamic education and at university there is a compulsory subject for all students called ‘Islamic and Asian Civilization’ which is felt by many to be a government instrument for furthering Islamization.

How the situation varies by region

The situation is the same throughout the country. The wide economic and social gap, including the rural-urban divide between East and West Malaysia, has to be considered in order to understand the situation of Christians across the regions. There are more remote areas with vast stretches of land and little infrastructure in the East, compared to West Malaysia. As many Christians live in East Malaysia, particularly in the state of Sarawak, their access to internet can be more limited or it may simply not be available. However, Islamic missionary work among Christians, especially among the Bumiputra, focuses on East Malaysia. Helped by the number of migrating Muslims, Sabah State ceased to be Christian majority several years ago, and Sarawak is now only a Christian majority state on paper.



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	3,054,000	9.2
Muslims	18,640,000	56.2
Others	6,291,700	19.0
Hindus	2,090,000	6.3

OTHERS include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian. Source²

Malaysia was ruled by a coalition made up of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the hardline Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). Snap elections were held on 19 November 2022. At the time of writing, coalitions emerging from the elections are not yet clear, and the situation of a hung parliament is totally new to Malaysia. However, one thing seems certain: in one way or another, the policy of Malay supremacy is here to stay and PAS emerged as the largest single party in parliament. There is also a monarchy which rotates every five years among nine regional sultans, who hold veto power in questions concerning Islam. Radical Islamic voices are growing stronger. A PAS MP publicly called the Bible ‘[a distorted book](#)’ and refused to retract his statement or apologize. The PAS was one of the very few government bodies worldwide to congratulate the Taliban for liberating and ruling Afghanistan. Although the government’s motto is ‘One Malaysia’, the practice of discriminating against non-Malay ethnic minorities has continued unabated by giving priority in public offices and the armed forces to

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

These communities consist of Roman Catholic, Anglican and Methodist Christians. They suffer some discrimination, but less than converts or non-traditional communities.

Converts to Christianity

By law, apostasy is punishable by death, although this has not been implemented. In some regions, Christian converts from a Muslim background can meet together. However, they all face varying degrees of opposition from family, community and the authorities.

Non-traditional Christian communities

This category includes Baptists and Pentecostals. They often face monitoring, discrimination, intimidation and harassment.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression blended with Ethno-religious hostility:

Malaysia was known as a liberal and tolerant Islamic country, but this reputation has been changing in recent years. The government has attempted to introduce Sharia law in the State of Kelantan. In custody matters, civil courts frequently decide in favor of the child's non-Muslim mother, which is why fathers sometimes decide to convert to Islam. This means the claim goes before a Sharia court and custody is granted to the Muslim father. The police prefer to implement the Sharia court's decisions as this causes less trouble for them. The Constitution prohibits Malays from converting to other religions and limits the propagation of non-Muslim religions. Converts can experience violence and pressure to recant from families, who see it as a dishonor.

Politics and society are strongly driven by an ethnic impulse of the preservation and superiority of the Malay ethnic group. While this is clearly blended with and dominated by religious motives, as every Malay has to be a Muslim, it plays out in the missionary dakwah movement, which has been aggressively pursuing poverty-stricken native communities in East Malaysia with lucrative incentives and benefits.

Dictatorial paranoia:

Both parties in the ruling coalition, UMNO and PAS, advocate for Malay Muslim dominance and preferential treatment. (The UMNO has a history of playing religious and racial cards in order to stay in power.) Whoever will govern Malaysia in the future, it is likely that *Dictatorial paranoia* will remain a considerable force in politics. Malaysia with lucrative incentives and benefits.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Women’s legal rights are undermined by provisions that make exceptions for Sharia law. Females converting from Islam to Christianity face the risk of sexual violence and/or forced marriage to a Muslim, including girls under the age of 18. Forced marriages of Christian women sometimes occur to secure financial support for the family. The COVID-19 crisis reportedly caused an increase in domestic violence, which is likely to have impacted Christians in such marriages.

- Forced divorce

- Forced marriage
- Targeted seduction
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Men and boys are often the target of conservative Muslim groups strongly opposed to proselytism. The persecution typically impacting Christian men comes in the form of bullying at the hands of vigilante justice, or monitoring by religious authorities.

- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	43	66
2022	50	63
2021	46	63
2020	40	62
2019	42	60

Malaysia’s score increased 2.3 points in WWL 2023 with both the scores for average pressure and violence rising. The strongest increase in pressure was in the National and Church sphere. This was due to reported cases of Christian NGOs/CSOs being discriminated compared with others and churches hindered in establishing schools. Christians continued to be marginalized and disadvantaged by a Malay-first policy, this does not seem likely to change in the foreseeable future. The violence score is still on a comparably low level, but increased 0.6 points compared to WWL 2022.



Example of violence in the reporting period

- **On 15 April 2022:** the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) [declared](#) in a 90-page report that there was no evidence to suggest any state involvement in the disappearance of Christians Joshua Hilmy and Ruth Sitepu in November 2016. While this is very different from the report SUHAKAM published three years ago about the abduction of Pastor Raymond Koh, it should not be read as clearing the authorities from all blame. At a press conference on 15 April 2022, the SUHAKAM commissioner stated: “The highly unsatisfactory conduct and shortcomings of the Royal Malaysia Police in investigating the disappearances of Joshua Hilmy and Ruth Sitepu contributed to the acquiescence of the state in the abduction of the couple.”

WWL Year	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians internally displaced	Christians forced to marry	Christians physically or mentally abused
2023	2	33	100*	32
2022	1	6	100*	1000*

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

Malay Muslims are not legally allowed to convert from Islam in any state except Sarawak, where the process is long and tedious. The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) wants the penalty for apostasy to be death, but so far, those efforts have been stalled. Converts to Christianity from Islam can be punished or sent to an Islamic ‘purification center’ where they are pressured into returning to Islam. There is a guideline from the Fatwa Department which says that Christmas trees and decorations should not be used if a Muslim plans to attend a Christmas event. It also forbids Muslims from attending Christmas functions that have ‘speech or gestures in the form of a praise to the non-Muslim religion’.

Family life

Children born to couples where one parent is a Muslim are automatically registered as Muslims and need the consent of both parents for official conversion. [Education is biased](#) towards a Malay and Islam centric worldview, discriminating against minorities. All Muslim children must attend Islamic education in schools, and children of converts can be harassed, discriminated against and put under pressure to convert to Islam. It is very common for Christian children to be bullied by their peers at school and beyond, with belittling and demeaning slurs which are often intertwined with racial slurs.

Community life

Public universities are still adopting the quota system, where Bumiputra students (Malays and indigenous

people) have a higher quota while non-Bumiputra students have fewer available places. Article 153 of the constitution allows a quota system for entering the civil service. Hence, preference is given to Malays in the public sector, and ethnic and religious minorities are not accepted. Consequently, ethnic and religious minorities rarely apply for these positions.



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National life

The Constitution prohibits adherents of other religions from propagating their religion among Malay Muslims. It is virtually impossible for ethnic Malays to legally convert to Christianity, since the Constitution stands against it and they can be charged with apostasy. Non-Malay-owned companies are required to have at least one Malay as board member. An [e-book](#) with the title 'Exposing the Christian Agenda' was published in Malaysia. In a decision about whether Sharia law or civil law should have precedence in case of conflict, a nine-member bench of the Federal Court of Malaysia decided that, according to the Constitution, Sharia courts do not have the right to exercise [judicial reviews](#) (Malay Mail, 21 February 2022).

Church life

It is very risky for churches to integrate Malay converts, especially in West Malaysia, and so they meet in secret. Church leaders have been natural targets for hostility from religion-based or ethnic groups, especially when their churches are perceived to engage in acts of evangelism among Muslims. The abduction of Pastor Raymond Koh in broad daylight in February 2017 sent shockwaves through the Christian

community. His whereabouts is still unknown, and the perpetrators have not been found. Findings point to the involvement of the special branch of the police.

In March 2021, the High Court finally [ruled](#) that the ban of the use of the word of 'Allah' was unconstitutional. The then-government declared to appeal this ruling, so there is still uncertainty about the use of the word 'Allah' for 'God'.

In 2021, a deputy minister announced that the federal government had drafted four new laws to strengthen Sharia law in Malaysia. Among them is a [law to control the development of non-Muslim religions](#). Although the Law Minister said that no such proposal had been submitted in the final draft, churches and members of other religious minorities [were alarmed](#) and claimed that such a law would contradict the constitutional provisions of Malaysia. Even though the draft was not accepted this time, it is a sign that religious minorities in Malaysia face ever more organized opposition and limitations.

International obligations & rights violated

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

1. [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\)](#)
2. [Convention on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\)](#)

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

- Christian female converts run the risk of being forcibly married to Muslim men (CEDAW Art. 16)
- Christian parents cannot raise their children according to their religious values (CRC Art. 14)



Situation of other religious minorities

Shias, Ahmadiyyas and al-Arqams continue to be seen as a threat since they deviate from Sunni Islam. Hindus, adherents to traditional Chinese religions and Buddhists are, like Christians, affected by the government's preferential treatment of ethnic Malays.



Open Doors' local partners have been working closely with two native community churches in Malaysia, offering training courses.

Open Doors in Malaysia

Open Doors' work to strengthen the church in Malaysia includes the following:

- Discipling and equipping Christians on how to respond biblically to persecution and be obedient to God, especially the Great Commission
- Providing local language Bibles and other Christian literature
- Facilitating gatherings to foster unity and overcome racial divisions
- Providing socio-economic assistance to needy believers.

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.
