

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
17

Mali



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

Radical Islamic groups took control of the north of Mali in 2012. In the chaos, Christian communities were attacked and churches destroyed, forcing many Christians to flee. The displacement still affects Christians who lost homes, communities, and places of worship. Although some Christians have returned to their homes under police protection, the threat of Islamic militancy still looms large. In fact, the threat of jihadists has expanded toward the south. Those carrying out evangelistic activities risk violence and abduction. Christian converts with a Muslim background face pressure and sometimes violent coercion from relatives and community members if their conversion is discovered. What is making the issue more problematic is the fact that the country's institutions are breaking apart at a fast rate, which encourages the jihadists to be more active in the country.

Quick facts

LEADER

Interim President Assimi Goïta

POPULATION

21,474,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

490,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Semi-Presidential Republic



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	490,000	2.3
Muslims	19,047,000	88.7
Ethno-religionists	1,909,000	8.9
Agnostics	25,300	0.1

Source²

Mali adopted a new constitution in 1992, signifying a successful transition to democratic rule. The country was considered exemplary among African nations for protecting civil liberties. However, in 2012, Tuareg rebels, who had been active for several years in the north, allied with radical Islamist groups, which included foreign fighters from Algeria. Together they seized several cities. A military coup then ousted the civilian administration. With the help of foreign military, the Malian government was able to push back the rebel advance and reclaim much of the previously lost territory. On 24 May 2021, the Malian Army led by Vice President Assimi Goïta assumed power. Despite suspensions by the Economic Community of West African States

(ECOWAS) and the African Union, on 7 June 2021, Goïta was sworn in as interim president.

Mali has been dominated by (mostly moderate) Islam for centuries and is characterized by tolerance. However, it is now highly dangerous to be a Christian of Muslim origin. Both Malian Christians (the majority being Roman Catholic) and Muslims tend to combine their faith with indigenous animist beliefs. Christians living outside the major cities face extreme danger even as civil servants (e.g., as teachers).

Mali's inability to contain the jihadist situation has resulted in a lack of security. Christians face the risk of being targeted, kidnapped and killed. Church-run schools have also been forced to close down. Militant groups forcibly recruit boys into the ranks of armed groups and, if Christian, force them to convert to Islam.

How the situation varies by region

Even though most Malian Christians live in the south, they have come under increasing pressure as a result of the threat of increasing radical Islamic activities in the north and north-eastern parts of the country. To some extent, there are small pockets of intense persecution in the southern part of the country as well.

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

Expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation in Mali. However, they are easy targets for abduction.

Historical Christian communities

Less than 3% of Malians are Christian and the majority belong to historical communities, such as Roman Catholic. Those living in the south enjoy relative freedom of religion in comparison to their counterparts in the north, but the threat of violence and kidnapping by Islamist groups has increased in the reporting period.

Converts to Christianity

Christians with a Muslim background are mainly found among the Bozo and the Dogon peoples. In addition to the threat from Islamist militants faced by most Malian Christians, converts face varying degrees of pressure from their family and community to renounce Christianity.

Non-traditional Christian communities

These include charismatic and Pentecostal communities, which are mainly found in southern Mali. Due to their style of worship and evangelistic activities, such communities are likely to draw the hostility of society at large.



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Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression:

Moderate Islam in Mali was disrupted in 2012. Islamists, heavily influenced by Wahhabism and global trends of Islamic radicalization and politicization, instituted a strict Sharia regime in the north, demolishing churches and assaulting Christians. The church in southern Mali also faces increasing pressure from Wahhabi groups.

Organized corruption and crime:

The country is situated in the Sahel region of West Africa, containing vast desert areas that are difficult for authorities to control. Criminal gangs use this as an opportunity to smuggle drugs into western Europe. Most gangs allied themselves with Islamist groups and persecute Christians. Many surviving Tuareg rebel forces, facing defeat by the government and its allies, have become criminal operators, reliant on the illegal trade of weapons, drugs, and people.

Ethno-religious hostility:

Although most of the Malian population is Muslim, they often mix their beliefs with tribal practices. Most tribal or ethnic leaders in remote parts of the country are hostile towards Muslims or Christians who oppose such practices, which can result in clashes between tribal leaders and Muslims or Christians.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Resurgent attacks by Islamist militants threaten female Christians with abduction and forced marriage. While this does not affect Christian girls alone, it is considered a common tactic used by Islamist militants to spread Islam and is a widely feared threat. Female converts are most vulnerable to harassment, threats, sexual abuse, physical violence, and even killings. Single converts will be forcibly married, and married converts divorced, possibly losing their children. Expulsion from family homes also increases vulnerability due to a lack of support. More generally, women must adopt an Islamic dress code.

- Denied custody of children
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

MEN

As Islamist militant attacks continue unabated across Mali, Christian males are particularly subjected to death threats and violent, physical attacks due to their faith. Those in rural or remote areas are at risk of abduction, death, and forced recruitment at the hands of violent groups, frequently jihadists. Targeted attacks on Christian homes and businesses are used to impoverish families and weaken Christian communities. Christians, particularly converts, are

pressured through social rejection, or reduced access to jobs or education. Married converts may also be forcibly divorced from their wives.

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community / networks
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Discrimination / harassment via education
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Forced divorce
- 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	17	76
2022	24	70
2021	28	67
2020	29	66
2019	24	68

Mali's score increased by six points compared to WWL 2022. The increase in pressure faced by Mali's Christians is caused by a combination of factors: the presence of mercenaries, a weak and corrupt, anti-western government that tries to link some Christian groups to some western governments, as well as the presence of jihadist groups who have expanded their activities utilizing a security vacuum left by the government.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Resources denied: In areas controlled more by Islamists than the Malian government, Christians are denied resources and prevented from accessing water and land to grow crops. This has been confirmed by local researchers.
- Many Christians forced to flee their homes due to the attacks by jihadists. Some of these are living in camps for internally displaced people (IDPs).
- Christian schools and other institutions were destroyed or closed. Some Muslim religious leaders made a demand that for schools to open and operate, Muslim dress code and teaching of the Quran should be included in the school curriculum.
- On 6 May 2022**, unknown gunmen kidnapped a pastor of a village called Heremakono (Diabaly, Niono).

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Christians physically or mentally abused
2023	10*	10*	10*	100*
2022	10*	10	10*	2

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 with a Muslim background experience the most difficulty in their private lives as pressure to recant is exerted by family and community members. However, any Christians living in the north of the country face harassment and violent attack if their faith becomes widely known.

Family life

The ongoing military conflict in Mali has made the practice of Christianity risky. Unlike many Muslim majority nations, Christianity is discouraged not by law, but because the practice of any faith other than Wahhabi Islam risks violent reprisals from Islamist groups. In the north, teachers have been intimidated and children forced to attend Quranic classes. They have also demanded that schools, many of which are operated by Christian organizations, be converted into madrassas. Muslim families will not tolerate conversion of a family member for reasons of family honor and will likely exert pressure on a convert to renounce Christianity.

Community life

While hostility and violence are most severe in the north, it is increasing everywhere. The authorities



have attempted to forbid hostile religious propaganda, but sermons in mosques have become increasingly radical in their opposition to Christians. Pressure is growing on local communities in central Mali to adopt Sharia law, despite its direct opposition to secular state law.

Regions under the control of Islamist groups demolish churches and monitor anyone suspected of being a Christian. Christians face the risk of abduction, rape, forced marriage, and murder.

National life

Mali is officially a secular state that respects freedom of religion, but militants in the north oppose such liberty. As a result of an almost total lack of political and social representation within society, Christians are frequently pressured into converting to Islam. Such pressure is particularly prevalent in the Malian army, security agencies, and the public health and banking sectors. As a Christian, particularly as a missionary, it is extremely dangerous to travel in Mali, with multiple incidents of kidnappings and murder occurring in recent years.

Church life

Christians attempting to return and repair damaged churches in the north have been harassed and attacked. Furthermore, refugees have been forcibly halted from constructing make-shift churches under threat of violence. Often contact with western non-governmental organizations (NGOs), UN peacekeepers, or foreign government allied military forces is construed as 'evangelizing' by Islamist groups. Under this pretext, local community leaders and insurgent groups will carry out attacks on vulnerable Christian populations or property.



International obligations & rights violated

Mali 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)

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

- Christian converts are killed on the spot if their conversion is discovered or merely suspected (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Christians are targeted and killed by extremist groups on the basis of their faith (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Christians are harassed and targeted for wearing religious symbols (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian converts are tortured and pressured to recant their conversion from Islam (ICCPR Arts. 7 and 18)
- Christian parents cannot raise their children according to their religious values (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christians face harassment and violence if they discuss their faith or engage in proselytization (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)

Situation of other religious minorities

In addition to Christians, Mali's other religious minorities include adherents to indigenous belief systems. Although such beliefs have historically co-existed with Islam, the rise of militant Islam has threatened that coexistence. Local Shias also face discrimination, while members of the Fulani people group are also targeted for the involvement of some of their people in militant Islamist groups that are terrorizing the region.



Open Doors in Mali

In partnership with the local church, Open Doors' vision for Christians in Mali is to become resilient in their persecution and continue to share the gospel. We help provide:

- Persecution preparedness training and support
- Discipleship enhancement programs
- Economic empowerment 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.
