

WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
8

Pakistan



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 ($6 \times 16.7 = 100$).¹ Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

Key findings

With independence in 1947, Pakistan officially became a Muslim state and the situation of Christians became more complicated. Historical churches have relative freedom but are heavily monitored and have been targeted for bomb attacks (the last large attack happened in December 2017 in Quetta). Churches more active in outreach and youth work face severe rights violations. All Christians suffer from institutionalized discrimination; occupations seen as low and dirty are reserved for Christians by the authorities, as can be seen in job adverts. Many Christians are poor and can be victims of bonded labor.

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

(though Christians also become lawyers, teachers and doctors). The country's notorious blasphemy laws target religious minorities (including Muslim minorities). A [draft bill](#) on forced conversion was rejected by parliament, after religious scholars deemed it 'anti-Islamic'. Punjab is the province with the most Christians and also the most persecution, intolerance and discrimination. Girls (many of them under-age) and young women from Christian and Hindu backgrounds continue to be abducted, for fully married and converted to Islam. Courts frequently accept these marriages and conversions, and all political efforts to change the practice or at least curb it have failed. In a discussion with Islamic scholars, Prime Minister Imran Khan promised that under his government no laws '[in direct conflict with the teachings of Islam](#)' would be enacted.

Quick facts

LEADER

Prime Minister Imran Khan

POPULATION

212,107,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

4,080,000 (1.9%)²

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Federal Parliamentary Republic



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Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	4,080,000	1.9
Muslims	204,554,000	96.4
Hindus	2,759,000	1.3
Ethno-religionists	228,000	0.1

Source³

Pakistan has suffered from unstable governments with three prolonged phases of military rule, the last ending in 2008. Former cricket star Imran Khan became Prime Minister in 2018 and has struggled to keep the economy afloat, especially during the COVID-19 crisis. Islam dominates every aspect of life. According to the constitution, the right to free speech

is subject to the restrictions necessary to ensure 'the glory of Islam'. Prime Minister Khan has [acknowledged](#) that Pakistan has official links with Islamic militant groups and has twice given into their demands. In 2018, he [removed](#) a member of the Ahmadi minority from a top economic adviser post since the Ahmadis are not recognized as Muslim by radical Sunni groups. On another occasion, Prime Minister Khan promised to '[expel](#) the French Ambassador to Pakistan' to appease violent protests by radical Islamic groups, after the publication of Charlie Hebdo cartoons in France. The protests were called off, but there was no actual implementation of this promise.

Christians are victims of roughly a quarter of all blasphemy accusations despite being less than 2% of the population. Some Pakistani states permit child marriage and an estimated [21%](#) of girls are married before the age of 18. Despite forced marriage being outlawed in 2011, girls from religious minorities are [commonly targeted](#). An estimated 1,000 honor killings

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

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

take place each year. 96% of the population is Muslim, of which the majority follow the Sunni tradition. Shiites make up less than 10% and the Ahmadi around 0.2%. Pakistan struggles economically, with 24.3% of the population living below the national poverty line. Pakistan increasingly relies on China's willingness to invest through its Belt and Road Initiative. Child labor is rampant. Many Christians are day laborers (for example in brick kilns) and Christians have suffered discrimination in receiving medical treatment and emergency relief linked to the COVID-19 crisis.

Due to low education rates for girls (exacerbated by early marriage, poverty and pressure from the Taliban who believe girls should not be educated) many women do not work. Business rivals accuse Christian men of blasphemy as a means of destroying their business and reputation. Additionally, Christian men typically occupy lower status jobs and have been referred to as 'Chura', a derogatory word reserved for road sweepers or sewage cleaners meaning 'filthy'.

Pakistan has the second-highest out-of-school rate in the world, although it is improving. Textbooks portray a biased view of minorities and are heavily influenced by radical Islam. Low state investment in education has led to a growing number of Islamic madrassas. While some madrassas teach core subjects, many simply offer Quran reading and Islamic Studies. These madrassas are not registered nor supervised. Conversion from Islam to another religion is unacceptable. There are regulations for social media issued by the Supreme Court to prevent slander of the courts, army and government.

Whilst it acts against certain jihadists, Pakistan works with others to reach its goals in neighboring countries. Jurisdiction over the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) is limited and separatist groups carry out attacks in Balochistan. Christians suffer in this volatile security situation and do not have channels for seeking protection. Pakistan has been listed as the sixth most dangerous country in the world to be a woman. Ideologically targeted sexual abuse is directed at religious minorities for sexual predation and as a 'conquest' to win the girl over to the majority religion.



How the situation varies by region

Since most Christians live in Punjab Province, many incidents of persecution, discrimination and intolerance occur there. However, next to Punjab, the province of Sindh is also notorious for being a hotspot for bonded labor, affecting many Christians as well.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation, but cannot attend churches all over the country; their church attendance is mostly limited to the cities. They face high pressure, but there is only a small number of them.

Historical Christian communities

The Roman Catholic Church and Church of Pakistan (Anglican Church) are examples of this category. As the most visible churches, they increasingly face hostilities and experience difficulties in getting permits for certain meetings. They are under strong control and monitoring. Especially in the cities, buildings and plots of land owned by the historical churches can be preyed upon by developers and authorities.

Converts to Christianity

Christians with a Muslim background suffer the brunt of religious freedom violations both from radical Islamic groups (who see them as apostates) and from families, friends and neighbors who see conversion as a shameful act of betrayal to family and community. There is also a small community of converts from a Hindu background.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal groups have come under closer scrutiny and are frequently harassed and attacked, especially when they are active in outreach among Muslims. However, most of their growth comes from Christians transferring from the historical churches.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression blended with ethno-religious hostility:

Pakistan is home to dozens of radical Islamic groups. Increasingly, advisory bodies to the government are completely made up of Islamic scholars who influence the laws. Thousands of madrassas are being run without government scrutiny on how they are funded or what they are teaching. Anyone calling for reform of blasphemy laws is openly threatened by radicals who believe ‘infidels’ deserve death. Banned radical groups often do not dissolve but rebrand, [go online](#) or merge with an existing group. The recent taking over of government power by the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan energized the radicals who may become an even stronger factor in Pakistani politics. The infamous ‘Red Mosque’ started flying the Taliban flag without authorities being able to do anything about it.

Pakistan suffers from ethnic fragmentation. Baluchistan Province and the central Sindh regions are considered beyond the reach of the state authorities. Religious minorities are seen as impure both for religious reasons and because they do not belong to the ruling ethnic groups.

Organized corruption and crime:

Corruption in politics, the justice system and the military is rampant. Organized crime is a big problem in urban and tribal areas, and is frequently connected to violent Islamic militancy. In Karachi, gangs, extortionists and mafia are all part of the landscape and enjoy political patronage due to influential connections. Bonded labor is an old but widespread form of slavery, affecting thousands of Christians in rural areas. Laborers become trapped, unable to repay their loans due to high interest rates. They have no legal way of registering complaints. Rich landlords collude with local politicians, benefitting greatly from this system. Land-grabbing also takes place; churches are expropriated and Christians chased away from their land.

Dictatorial paranoia:

The government has to contend with opposition, corruption charges, increasingly assertive radical groups and a powerful independent army (with whom they must remain on good terms). Christians become political pawns. They can be courted by the government and army to stay in power, or discriminated against if that is beneficial. Since the army wants to please some radical groups, the targeting of Christians, while not army policy, is considered necessary collateral damage.



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How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Christian girls are particularly vulnerable in Pakistan. Reports indicate that hundreds are abducted, raped, forced to 'marry' their abductor, and converted by force each year. Such 'marriages' are used to place the under-age girls beyond other means of legal recourse available to their parents. This is a widely utilized and strategically targeted pressure point against minority faith communities. There have also been reports of the targeted trafficking of Christian girls for both bonded labor, where they are chained to their workplace, and a 'prostitution ring' which smuggles Christian girls into China.

- Abduction
- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- False charges
- Forced marriage
- Trafficking
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological
- Violence - sexual
- Violence - verbal

MEN

Christian men live in constant fear of blasphemy allegations, destruction of property, imprisonment, beatings and execution. There are also reports of Christian boys being subject to sexual abuse. Christian men are often compelled to take lower status jobs and are considered impure. They are often referred to as 'Chura', a derogatory word meaning 'filthy'. While there is also a Christian middle class and not all hold lower status jobs, discrimination and social inferiority are ubiquitous. Men and boys might also be trapped in cycles of bonded labor, typically in brick-kiln factories.

- Abduction
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- False charges
- Imprisonment by government
- Trafficking
- Violence - death
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological
- Violence - sexual
- Violence - verbal

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution score out of 100
2022	8	87.38
2021	5	88.16
2020	5	88.15
2019	5	87.18
2018	5	86.47

The pressure on Christians in Pakistan is extreme. Christians, especially converts, suffer from blasphemy laws and from deeply-rooted daily discrimination. Violence against Christians has been at the maximum level since WWL 2016, even though there has not been a large-scale suicide attack targeting Christians since 2017.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Arif Masih, a Christian, was kidnapped and poisoned on **23 May 2021** in Tariqabad, after he tried to report a harassment case against his sister.
- The widely reported cases of 13-year-old Arzoo Masih from **October 2020**, Neha Pervaiz in **November 2020**, Farah Shaheen in **December 2020**, Shakaina Masih in **March 2021**, Nayab Gill in **June 2021** and Chashman Masih from **July 2021** show that kidnapping and forced conversion is a continuing pattern.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians abducted	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted
2022	620	183	1000	1000
2021	307	68	100	100

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 talking about their faith with Muslims because blasphemy laws can mean dangerous consequences. Even Facebook posts can be risky if the content is seen as challenging Islamic values. It is dangerous for Pakistani Christians to keep Christian materials beyond their immediate personal use as they could be suspected of evangelizing Muslims. Displaying a Christian symbol or having a Christian name can trigger discrimination or vandalism of property. Reports of Christians wearing a cross being spat at or targeted aggressively in the street, in traffic or at a workplace, are indicators that the situation is becoming more difficult.

Family life

In small towns and remote villages, Christian children have to attend Islamic teaching at the local madrassa while Christian teaching is restricted to Sunday services. Christian parents will try to prevent their children from speaking about their faith since they could be pressured to 'come back' to Islam. Christian parents are visited to pressure them into sending their children to Islamic events and teaching them Arabic on the pretense of improving their grades. This confuses children and makes them vulnerable to forced conversion. At school, Christian children are often not allowed to use the same water fountain as their Muslim classmates to avoid 'defiling' the drinking water. Children are often bullied. Many are asked to clean the latrines or sweep the floor as Christians are commonly perceived as being sweepers. This attitude also has its background in caste considerations since the majority of Christians come from lower

caste backgrounds. Some schoolbooks incite hatred against Christians. The new school curriculum further Islamizes education and educates children that adherents of other religions are inferior. This policy is doing much harm to Christian families.

Community life

Christians are monitored by the state and increasingly by non-state actors. Even expatriate Christians are called by the local panchayat (village council) to explain why they believe in Christ, and may be compelled into accepting Islam. During the COVID-19 crisis, there was a campaign by radical Islamists to force conversions using food rations, which would be given to Christians who recited the Islamic creed. (Many young people did this, while others starved to death or committed suicide.) At the same time, Christian nurses were asked to work at the forefront of infection wards. In workplaces, the pressure against Christians is often so great they have to change jobs multiple times to avoid being made to convert to Islam. Christians are frequently forced to do menial work like sweeping or carrying water. A [good illustration](#) is the 5% quota which had been introduced to guarantee jobs for minority communities in the government sector. Out of the total vacant posts, 43% were reserved for minorities; there were more than 30,000 such positions vacant at the end of September 2021. Christians are seen as unclean, so their use of shared facilities is thought to defile Muslims, a [heritage of the caste system](#).

National life

Pakistan adopted an Islamic Constitution in 1973 and

Sharia law in its civil code. The recent Islamization process began with the 1986 introduction of blasphemy laws, which affect minorities and are often used for settling personal scores. Christians are under-represented in the political arena and their views are often ignored. Protecting girls from religious minorities from abductions and forced conversion/ marriage is seen by many politicians as unnecessary.

Church life

Church activities are monitored. Security guards are provided by the authorities but they also listen, report and likely pass intelligence on to radical Islamic groups. Despite the state's promise to protect churches, there have been several attacks on them with dozens of victims. Church leaders are primary targets for harassment as they are the most visible representatives of the Christian minority. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is strongly opposed so it would be dangerous for a church to openly include converts. Advocacy for oppressed minorities is seen as a challenge to the government.



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International obligations & rights violated

Pakistan 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)

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

- Christians are pressured by their community to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian women and girls are abducted, raped and gangraped (ICCPR Art. 7)
- Christian girls are forced to marry their abductor and converted by force (ICCPR Art. 23; CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art. 10)
- Christian girls are trafficked into slave labor and the sex trade (CRC Art. 34 and ICCPR Art. 8)
- Christians are falsely accused, charged of blasphemy and sentenced to death (ICCPR Art. 19)
- Christians are assumed to take jobs that are considered 'dishonorable' and 'low' because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26 and ICESCR Art. 11)

Situation of other religious minorities

Religious minorities are extremely vulnerable. Ahmadis are considered non-Muslim and have been denied ID cards and forced to sign documents declaring the finality of the Prophet Mohammed, which goes against their belief. They have experienced incitement to violence against their community by government officials and a surge in targeted killings. Armed sectarian groups target Shia Muslims, including the Hazara community. There is no provision in the law for atheists, who are targeted by blasphemy laws. Hindu females suffer from abductions and forced conversions.



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Open Doors in Pakistan

Open Doors is active in Persian Gulf countries through the ALIVE network of partner churches. Because of the sensitive nature of our work, and the increasing risks faced by our partners and beneficiaries, we cannot provide more specific information.

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.
