

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**7**

## 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 x 16.7 = 100).

## 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 (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, forcefully married and converted to Islam (more detailed accounts below). Courts frequently accept these marriages and conversions, and all political efforts to change or curb the practice have failed.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif

### POPULATION

229,489,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

4,194,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Federal Parliamentary Republic



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## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	4,194,000	1.8
Muslims	221,645,000	96.6
Hindus	2,916,000	1.3
Ethno-religionists	232,000	0.1

Source<sup>2</sup>

Pakistan has suffered from unstable governments with three prolonged phases of military rule, the most recent ending in 2008. The army is still pulling the strings behind the scenes. Army leaders had been content with Prime Minister Imran Khan taking the blame for the dire economic situation, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, but their patience came to an end when Khan tried to influence and delay military appointments, such as the Chief of Army Intelligence (ISI) (Reuters, 26 October 2021). On 11 April 2022, a no-confidence motion against Khan passed and Shehbaz Sharif became the new Prime Minister, immediately facing a barrage of challenges. While joining his anti-government convoy in Eastern Pakistan, Imran Khan was [shot at](#) and his leg wounded in what he and his supporters called an assassination attempt, blaming the government (Reuters, 4 November 2022). Just days earlier, Pakistan's election commission had ruled to

[disqualify](#) him from holding public office for five years (CNN, 21 October 2022).

According to the constitution, the right to free speech is subject to the restrictions necessary to ensure “the glory of Islam”. Prime Minister Khan [acknowledged](#) that Pakistan has official links with Islamic militant groups and gave into their demands on several occasions.

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 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

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

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

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 they cannot attend churches all over the country; their church attendance is mostly limited to the cities. Expatriate Christians 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 which include challenges in getting permits to meet, and abductions or forced conversions of their members. They have to put up with 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 their families, friends and neighbors who see conversion as a shameful act of betrayal. 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, although 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 take-over of government power by the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan has been welcomed by politicians in Pakistan. However, the government soon found the Taliban are not as easy to control as they thought. Radical forces seem to become an even stronger factor in Pakistani politics.

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 still 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 strong opposition by ousted Prime Minister Khan and the masses he is able to mobilize. The government also faces corruption charges, increasingly assertive radical groups and a powerful independent army, with whom it 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

Reports indicate that each year hundreds of Christian girls are abducted, raped, forced to convert and “marry” their abductor. 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. Many families never see their girls again, and the authorities rarely take action to bring perpetrators to justice. Women and girls are also at risk of sexual violence in the public sphere, including in workplaces and schools.

- Abduction
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Forced marriage
- Targeted seduction
- Trafficking
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

## MEN

Christian men live in constant fear of blasphemy allegations, destruction of property, imprisonment, beatings and execution. There are 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
- Economic harassment via work/job/business

- False charges
- Imprisonment by the government
- Trafficking
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	7	86
2022	8	87
2021	5	88
2020	5	88
2019	5	87

*The very high and extremely high scores for pressure in the individual spheres of life only decreased by a mere 0.8 points. This confirms Pakistan as one of the countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian. The violence score has stayed at the maximum level for many years now. Although since the Quetta attacks in December 2017, there have been no major attacks against churches or gatherings of Christians, Pakistan continues to score the maximum for killings and attacks against church buildings. The country’s notorious blasphemy laws continue to claim their victims as well; whoever plays even with the thought of changing those laws, plays with their life.*



# Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **August 2022:** 65-year-old Christian William Masih was killed and three Christian teenagers were wounded in a drive-by shooting at a playground at the Christian colony in Mastung, Balochistan province ([UCA News, 10 August 2022](#)).
- **January 2022:** Reverend William Siraj was killed in an ambush after he drove home from a church service in Peshawar. Another pastor was wounded ([DW, 30 January 2022](#)).
- A forced conversion bill stalled in parliament, although research showed an increase of 177% of such cases against religious minorities in 2020 ([UCA News, 18 October 2021](#)).
- The cases of 12 year-old [Meerab Abbas](#) (The Christian Post, 16 November 2021), 14 year-old [Mahnoor Ashraf](#) (Morning Star News, 14 January 2022), [three other girls](#) (Agenzia fides, 15 January 2022) as well as [Saba Masih](#) (Morning Star News, 27 May 2022) show that kidnapping and forced conversion is a continuing pattern. The [pattern](#) is also beginning to be recognized by the media (Vice News, 30 November 2020).

WWL Year	Christians killed	Christians abducted	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Christians forced to marry
2023	12	10*	10*	10*
2022	620	100*	1000*	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

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 madrasa 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 pretence of bettering 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, and 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 harming 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 to accept 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 that 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 very [good illustration](#) is the 5% quota, which had been introduced to guarantee jobs for minorities in the government sector. Out of the total vacant posts, a huge 43% were reserved for minorities. In absolute numbers, there were more than 30,000 positions for minorities 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. Politicians deny that it is necessary to protect religious minority girls from abductions and forced conversion/ marriage.

### 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 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.



## 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 gang-raped (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 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. More than 170 Ahmadi graves and several houses of worship were desecrated. Meanwhile, after the spokesperson of Indian ruling party BJP made controversial statements about the Prophet Muhammad in June 2022, a Hindu temple in Karachi was destroyed (USCIRF, Country Update Pakistan, 5 August 2022). 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: © 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.*

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