

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
21

Uzbekistan



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

All Christians experience some form of pressure and violence on the grounds of their faith. Russian Orthodox churches experience the fewest problems from the government, as they do not usually attempt to make contact with the Uzbek population. It is the indigenous Christian converts with a Muslim background who most often experience violations from the state, family, and community. Where churches have not been registered, Christians suffer from police raids, threats, arrests, and fines.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev

POPULATION

34,382,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

351,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Authoritarian Presidential Republic



non-governmental organizations (NGOs) claim the government continues to torture people arrested and jailed on suspicion of religious extremism or for participating in underground Islamic activity.

Although Uzbekistan's main religion is Islam, predominantly Sunni, it would be incorrect to call Uzbekistan a Muslim country. Seventy years of atheism during the Soviet era have left a deep influence and the secular government keeps Islam under tight control, with citizens following Islamic culture rather than adhering strictly to Islamic teachings. The small Christian minority is weak due to much division between the various denominations.

How the situation varies by region

The level of pressure by government officials in Uzbekistan is the same across the country. Pressure from family and the community on converts is stronger outside urban areas, especially in the Fergana Valley.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

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

Historical Christian communities

The Russian Orthodox Church abides by the limitations set out by the government and is therefore left more or less undisturbed. Church services may be monitored but they are conducted unhindered, and members can meet without fear of arrest. However, the printing or import of Christian materials is restricted.

Converts to Christianity

Christian converts from a Muslim background suffer severe violations from the state and pressure from family and community.

Non-traditional Christian communities

After converts, this category of Christians is the second most targeted group, especially when the churches have not been registered. Evangelical and Pentecostal groups suffer from raids, threats, arrests, and fines.

Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	351,000	1.0
Muslims	32,877,000	95.6
Agnostics	831,000	2.4
Atheists	217,000	0.6

Source²

In Uzbekistan, all power rests in the hands of President Mirziyoyev (who has ruled since 2016) and opposition movements and independent media are banned.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCRIF) designated Uzbekistan a "Country of Particular Concern" during 2006-2017, after which it was moved to the Special Watch List category in light of progress on religious freedom. In July 2021, new changes were made in the law on "Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations". The registration process for religious organizations has been made easier, while criminal punishment is still retained for unregistered religious activity. Official approval of the content, production, distribution, and storage of religious publications is still mandated by the law. Proselytism and other missionary activities are declared illegal. The law retains restrictions on private religious education. Whilst registered churches have seen slight improvements, the situation has not changed for other groups, especially converts with a Muslim background. Christians are targeted for raids, arrests, and oppression. Some

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)

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Dictatorial paranoia:

No religious activities beyond state-controlled institutions are allowed. Protestants are frequently branded as “extremists” and it is thought their aim is to spy on and destroy the current political system. From this perspective, Protestants need not only to be controlled but, if necessary, eradicated.

Islamic oppression blended with Clan oppression:

If indigenous (Muslim) citizens convert to Christianity, they are likely to experience pressure and occasionally physical violence from their families and the local community to force them to return to their former faith. Some converts are locked up by their families, beaten, and even expelled from their communities. Local mullahs preach against them, adding pressure. As a result, most converts will do their best to hide their faith.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Traditional Islamic culture and patriarchal norms place women lower than men and subservient within the family context. Women are not free to choose their own religion and face severe opposition to conversion. Incarceration by a convert’s family (i.e., house arrest) remains a common and socially accepted form of putting female converts under pressure. Access to social networks, specifically Christian networks, is restricted in the hope that the convert will return to Islam. Abduction, forced divorce, and forced marriage are common, with sexual violence within marriage often under-acknowledged and normalized.

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community / networks
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

MEN

Church leaders, who are mostly men, are common targets for rights violations. They can be fined, detained, denied exit visas, or put under house arrest. This is a deliberate tactic, creating a ripple effect of fear throughout their congregations. Leaders of unregistered churches in particular are insulted, beaten and humiliated. Christian men face continual inequality;

they are denied promotions, lose jobs and endure state monitoring. Local Muslim communities will obstruct Christian businesses, and mandatory military service exposes men to harassment. Male converts face verbal, physical, and psychological abuse.

- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Economic harassment via fines
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Imprisonment by the government
- Military/militia conscription / service against conscience
- Travel bans / restrictions on movement
- 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	21	71
2022	21	71
2021	21	71
2020	18	73
2019	17	74

The score of 71 points is the same as in WWL 2022. The score went down in the Community sphere of life, stayed the same in the Private and Family spheres, and went slightly up in the National and Church spheres. The slight decrease in the level of violence compensated for that. The two main persecution engines in Uzbekistan (Dictatorial paranoia and Islamic oppression, blended with Clan oppression) are active in all spheres of life, but Islamic oppression (blended with Clan oppression) dominates in the Private and Family spheres of life, while Dictatorial paranoia dominates in the National and Church spheres of life. Both engines meet each other in the Community sphere. Muslim families, friends, and villagers exert pressure on converts in particular, while the government imposes many restrictions on church activities.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **Christians attacked:** According to sources, at least 48 converts to Christianity have been abused and beaten by their families and villagers.
- **Christian properties damaged:** Neighbors destroyed a greenhouse of a Christian couple during the current reporting period.
- **Christians expelled from their homes:** According to our sources, a couple and their son were forced to leave their home.
- **Christians expelled from the country:** According to our sources, a missionary couple with their four children were forced to leave Uzbekistan.

These incidents were reported by local sources. Further, more specific details cannot be given for security reasons.

WWL Year	Christians internally displaced	Christians forced to flee their countries	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians' private property damaged or confiscated
2023	3	6	48	1
2022	8	0	64	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

It is already very risky for a convert to discuss their Christian faith in society, including with members of the family. The state views such conversations as evangelism, which is punishable by arrest and imprisonment. Discovery of the possession of Christian materials can lead to family exile, community harassment, violence, and government arrest.

Family life

Most Uzbekistanis are Muslims. As a result, wider Muslim society (family, friends, community) will pressurize children of converts to receive Islamic teaching. On the other hand, anti-religious propaganda is foisted on students at schools and universities. Alienated and treated as hostile both by extended family and the state, the only place for converts to provide Christian teaching to their children is at home, since all youth work through churches is illegal.

Community life

Christians are under constant siege from both wider Islamic society and the secular state. Converts are monitored by their families, community, and police, who regularly stop and search them to ensure intimidation. Protestant groups are actively reported to the government and are often victims of police raids, fines, arrests, and violence.

National life

The law requires religious groups to register with the government, and it declares the religious activities of unregistered groups to be illegal. The law also restricts public speech and proselytism, censors religious literature and limits the possession of religious materials in private homes. Raids on Christians' homes have resulted in a combination of fines, corrective labor, and prison sentences.

The authorities can generally expect to act with impunity. Harm caused to converts and Christians accused of evangelism by the Muslim community will almost certainly happen with impunity.

Church life

Religious work among youth and minors, including Sunday schools, is strictly prohibited.

The criminal code punishes proselytism with up to three years in prison (source: International Religious Freedom Report for 2017 Uzbekistan). It is therefore dangerous for churches to openly accept converts.

International obligations & rights violated

Uzbekistan 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)

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

- Christians are killed for their faith (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Churches from non-traditional denominations are raided, services disrupted, and attendees are arbitrarily arrested (ICCPR Arts. 9; 18 and 21)
- Ownership and consultation of religious literature is severely restricted beyond international permitted limitations (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Christians and their activities are monitored by the authorities and the surrounding community (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

All religious groups, including Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, and Baha'is suffer under a very high level of state surveillance and oppression. The Council for Religious Affairs (CRA) is pivotal in this.



Open Doors in Uzbekistan

Open Doors provides immediate aid to Central Asian believers when they are placed in prison, excluded from families and communities, and deprived of livelihood and employment because of their faith in Christ. We strengthen the persecuted church in Central Asia primarily through:

- Literature distribution
- Prayer support
- Biblical training
- Children / youth training
- Women's ministry
- Advocacy and awareness training (SSTS)
- Presence ministry
- Medical ministry
- Vocational training
- Social-economic development projects

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.
