World Watch Research

# South Sudan:

# Persecution Dynamics

March 2025

# Contents

# World Watch List 2025 – Top 50

| Rank | Country | Private life | Family life | Community life | National life | Church life | Violence | Total Score WWL 2025 | Total Score WWL 2024 | Total Score WWL 2023 | Total Score WWL 2022 | Total Score WWL 2021 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | North Korea | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 14.4 | 98 | 96 | 98 | 96 | 94 |
| 2 | Somalia | 16.5 | 16.7 | 16.6 | 16.6 | 16.7 | 11.1 | 94 | 93 | 92 | 91 | 92 |
| 3 | Yemen | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 10.6 | 94 | 89 | 89 | 88 | 87 |
| 4 | Libya | 16.0 | 16.2 | 15.9 | 16.2 | 16.4 | 10.6 | 91 | 91 | 88 | 91 | 92 |
| 5 | Sudan | 14.1 | 14.2 | 15.5 | 14.9 | 15.3 | 16.1 | 90 | 87 | 83 | 79 | 79 |
| 6 | Eritrea | 14.6 | 14.9 | 15.5 | 15.9 | 15.9 | 12.2 | 89 | 89 | 89 | 88 | 88 |
| 7 | Nigeria | 13.5 | 13.9 | 14.6 | 14.9 | 14.5 | 16.7 | 88 | 88 | 88 | 87 | 85 |
| 8 | Pakistan | 13.6 | 13.9 | 15.0 | 15.0 | 12.9 | 16.7 | 87 | 87 | 86 | 87 | 88 |
| 9 | Iran | 15.0 | 14.6 | 13.5 | 15.9 | 16.5 | 10.9 | 86 | 86 | 86 | 85 | 86 |
| 10 | Afghanistan | 15.6 | 15.9 | 15.9 | 16.4 | 16.7 | 5.0 | 85 | 84 | 84 | 98 | 94 |
| 11 | India | 12.2 | 12.9 | 13.3 | 14.9 | 13.9 | 16.5 | 84 | 83 | 82 | 82 | 83 |
| 12 | Saudi Arabia | 15.2 | 15.3 | 14.8 | 15.8 | 16.6 | 3.3 | 81 | 81 | 80 | 81 | 78 |
| 13 | Myanmar | 12.6 | 11.1 | 13.5 | 14.1 | 12.9 | 16.5 | 81 | 79 | 80 | 79 | 74 |
| 14 | Mali | 11.1 | 10.1 | 14.7 | 13.0 | 15.2 | 15.6 | 80 | 79 | 76 | 70 | 67 |
| 15 | China | 13.2 | 10.1 | 12.8 | 14.6 | 16.1 | 11.1 | 78 | 78 | 77 | 76 | 74 |
| 16 | Maldives | 15.6 | 15.3 | 13.7 | 15.8 | 16.5 | 0.7 | 78 | 78 | 77 | 77 | 77 |
| 17 | Iraq | 14.2 | 14.4 | 14.3 | 14.8 | 13.9 | 6.1 | 78 | 79 | 76 | 78 | 82 |
| 18 | Syria | 13.5 | 14.4 | 13.9 | 14.4 | 14.3 | 7.0 | 78 | 81 | 80 | 78 | 81 |
| 19 | Algeria | 14.7 | 14.3 | 11.5 | 14.7 | 16.0 | 6.3 | 77 | 79 | 73 | 71 | 70 |
| 20 | Burkina Faso | 11.7 | 9.7 | 13.2 | 11.5 | 14.0 | 15.6 | 76 | 75 | 71 | 68 | 67 |
| 21 | Morocco | 13.2 | 13.8 | 11.6 | 12.9 | 14.3 | 8.3 | 74 | 71 | 69 | 69 | 67 |
| 22 | Laos | 11.8 | 10.7 | 13.5 | 14.1 | 13.9 | 9.8 | 74 | 75 | 68 | 69 | 71 |
| 23 | Mauritania | 14.6 | 14.2 | 13.8 | 14.2 | 14.2 | 2.8 | 74 | 72 | 72 | 70 | 71 |
| 24 | Bangladesh | 12.4 | 10.6 | 12.7 | 11.3 | 10.4 | 16.1 | 74 | 71 | 69 | 68 | 67 |
| 25 | Uzbekistan | 14.6 | 12.7 | 13.5 | 12.4 | 15.5 | 4.4 | 73 | 71 | 71 | 71 | 71 |
| 26 | Cuba | 13.2 | 8.5 | 13.9 | 13.3 | 15.1 | 9.1 | 73 | 73 | 70 | 66 | 62 |
| 27 | CAR | 10.3 | 8.6 | 13.9 | 9.6 | 14.0 | 15.6 | 72 | 70 | 70 | 68 | 66 |
| 28 | Niger | 9.4 | 9.6 | 14.5 | 7.7 | 14.6 | 15.7 | 72 | 70 | 70 | 68 | 62 |

| Rank | Country | Private life | Family life | Community life | National life | Church life | Violence | Total Score WWL 2025 | Total Score WWL 2024 | Total Score WWL 2023 | Total Score WWL 2022 | Total Score WWL 2021 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 29 | Turkmenistan | 14.3 | 12.3 | 13.6 | 13.9 | 15.3 | 1.5 | 71 | 70 | 70 | 69 | 70 |
| 30 | Nicaragua | 12.4 | 7.6 | 13.7 | 13.3 | 14.1 | 9.6 | 71 | 70 | 65 | 56 | 51 |
| 31 | Mexico | 11.7 | 9.0 | 12.5 | 11.8 | 11.0 | 14.6 | 71 | 68 | 67 | 65 | 64 |
| 32 | Oman | 14.5 | 14.1 | 10.9 | 13.8 | 14.1 | 3.0 | 70 | 69 | 65 | 66 | 63 |
| 33 | Ethiopia | 9.9 | 9.7 | 12.6 | 10.4 | 12.1 | 15.6 | 70 | 69 | 66 | 66 | 65 |
| 34 | Tunisia | 12.4 | 13.2 | 10.1 | 12.6 | 13.8 | 8.1 | 70 | 69 | 67 | 66 | 67 |
| 35 | DRC | 8.0 | 7.9 | 12.6 | 10.8 | 14.5 | 16.1 | 70 | 67 | 67 | 66 | 64 |
| 36 | Bhutan | 13.2 | 13.2 | 12.3 | 14.1 | 14.2 | 2.2 | 69 | 68 | 66 | 67 | 64 |
| 37 | Mozambique | 9.3 | 8.5 | 13.9 | 8.4 | 12.5 | 15.9 | 68 | 68 | 68 | 65 | 63 |
| 38 | Kazakhstan | 13.3 | 11.6 | 12.2 | 12.8 | 14.2 | 4.3 | 68 | 65 | 65 | 64 | 64 |
| 39 | Tajikistan | 14.1 | 12.7 | 12.7 | 13.2 | 13.7 | 1.9 | 68 | 66 | 66 | 65 | 66 |
| 40 | Egypt | 12.7 | 13.7 | 12.1 | 12.4 | 10.9 | 6.3 | 68 | 68 | 68 | 71 | 75 |
| 41 | Qatar | 14.2 | 14.2 | 10.5 | 13.2 | 14.4 | 0.7 | 67 | 67 | 68 | 74 | 67 |
| 42 | Comoros | 12.7 | 14.0 | 11.2 | 12.4 | 14.2 | 2.6 | 67 | 66 | 66 | 63 | 62 |
| 43 | Cameroon | 8.8 | 7.6 | 12.6 | 8.4 | 13.1 | 16.1 | 67 | 66 | 65 | 65 | 64 |
| 44 | Vietnam | 10.8 | 9.5 | 12.2 | 14.1 | 14.1 | 5.9 | 67 | 68 | 70 | 71 | 72 |
| 45 | Turkey | 13.0 | 11.7 | 11.7 | 13.2 | 11.5 | 5.4 | 67 | 64 | 66 | 65 | 69 |
| 46 | Colombia | 11.0 | 7.9 | 12.7 | 11.5 | 10.5 | 12.6 | 66 | 68 | 71 | 68 | 67 |
| 47 | Kyrgyzstan | 13.5 | 10.3 | 11.7 | 11.4 | 12.4 | 6.9 | 66 | 59 | 59 | 58 | 58 |
| 48 | Brunei | 14.8 | 14.8 | 10.8 | 10.8 | 14.0 | 0.6 | 66 | 66 | 65 | 64 | 64 |
| 49 | Chad | 11.0 | 8.2 | 10.2 | 9.9 | 10.3 | 15.9 | 65 | 61 | 58 | 55 | 53 |
| 50 | Jordan | 12.9 | 14.3 | 10.4 | 12.2 | 12.8 | 2.4 | 65 | 65 | 65 | 66 | 64 |

# World Watch List 2025 – Ranks 51-78

| Rank | Country | Private life | Family life | Community life | National life | Church life | Violence | Total Score WWL 2025 | Total Score WWL 2024 | Total Score WWL 2023 | Total Score WWL 2022 | Total Score WWL 2021 |
|------|---------|--------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|----------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 51 | Malaysia | 12.8 | 13.7 | 11.7 | 12.4 | 11.2 | 3.0 | 65 | 64 | 66 | 63 | 63 |
| 52 | Azerbaijan | 13.3 | 10.2 | 9.6 | 12.2 | 13.7 | 5.6 | 65 | 60 | 59 | 60 | 56 |
| 53 | Kenya | 10.3 | 9.2 | 11.4 | 8.0 | 11.5 | 13.9 | 64 | 63 | 64 | 63 | 62 |
| 54 | Nepal | 12.2 | 10.6 | 9.5 | 12.6 | 12.3 | 5.9 | 63 | 62 | 61 | 64 | 66 |
| 55 | Tanzania | 9.3 | 10.8 | 10.3 | 8.6 | 8.7 | 15.4 | 63 | 62 | 63 | 61 | 58 |
| 56 | Russian Federation | 12.7 | 7.9 | 10.7 | 13.1 | 14.1 | 4.4 | 63 | 58 | 57 | 56 | 57 |
| 57 | Djibouti | 12.3 | 12.6 | 12.7 | 10.1 | 12.1 | 1.7 | 61 | 61 | 60 | 59 | 56 |
| 58 | Kuwait | 13.1 | 13.6 | 9.4 | 12.0 | 12.2 | 0.9 | 61 | 61 | 64 | 64 | 63 |
| 59 | Indonesia | 10.9 | 11.9 | 10.9 | 11.6 | 10.2 | 5.7 | 61 | 66 | 68 | 68 | 63 |
| 60 | UAE | 13.3 | 13.4 | 9.5 | 11.3 | 12.8 | 0.6 | 61 | 61 | 62 | 62 | 62 |
| 61 | Sri Lanka | 12.7 | 8.7 | 11.5 | 11.5 | 8.5 | 7.6 | 60 | 60 | 57 | 63 | 62 |
| 62 | Palestinian Territories | 13.1 | 13.3 | 10.3 | 10.7 | 12.1 | 0.2 | 60 | 60 | 60 | 59 | 58 |
| 63 | Burundi | 7.6 | 7.8 | 9.4 | 9.8 | 9.7 | 14.6 | 59 | 57 | 55 | 52 | 48 |
| 64 | Rwanda | 9.4 | 7.7 | 9.0 | 10.4 | 12.1 | 9.4 | 58 | 58 | 57 | 50 | 42 |
| 65 | Honduras | 7.9 | 4.7 | 11.7 | 7.3 | 9.9 | 13.1 | 55 | 55 | 53 | 48 | 46 |
| 66 | Togo | 9.2 | 6.7 | 10.4 | 7.1 | 11.5 | 9.3 | 54 | 52 | 49 | 44 | 43 |
| 67 | Bahrain | 12.0 | 13.2 | 8.6 | 11.3 | 8.5 | 0.6 | 54 | 55 | 55 | 57 | 56 |
| 68 | Guinea | 10.3 | 7.5 | 8.3 | 8.3 | 10.5 | 8.9 | 54 | 52 | 48 | 43 | 47 |
| 69 | Ukraine | 6.8 | 5.0 | 7.8 | 12.5 | 13.5 | 7.2 | 53 | 44 | 37 | 37 | 34 |
| 70 | Angola | 6.8 | 6.7 | 8.1 | 11.5 | 11.4 | 8.3 | 53 | 52 | 52 | 51 | 46 |
| 71 | Venezuela | 6.3 | 4.4 | 11.1 | 10.0 | 10.8 | 9.6 | 52 | 53 | 56 | 51 | 39 |
| 72 | Uganda | 8.1 | 5.0 | 7.4 | 6.7 | 8.8 | 16.1 | 52 | 52 | 51 | 48 | 47 |
| 73 | Ivory Coast | 12.0 | 6.5 | 8.7 | 5.9 | 8.0 | 9.6 | 51 | 44 | 44 | 42 | 42 |
| 74 | Lebanon | 11.5 | 10.1 | 7.0 | 6.2 | 6.7 | 7.2 | 49 | 48 | 40 | 35 | 34 |
| 75 | Gambia | 8.3 | 8.2 | 8.9 | 8.8 | 8.9 | 4.4 | 48 | 47 | 44 | 44 | 43 |
| 76 | South Sudan | 5.7 | 4.4 | 7.0 | 6.3 | 8.1 | 15.6 | 47 | 46 | 46 | 43 | 43 |

| Rank | Country | Private life | Family life | Community life | National life | Church life | Violence | Total Score WWL 2025 | Total Score WWL 2024 | Total Score WWL 2023 | Total Score WWL 2022 | Total Score WWL 2021 |
|------|---------|-------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|----------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 77 | Belarus | 9.9 | 3.7 | 5.0 | 10.8 | 14.1 | 3.1 | 47 | 46 | 43 | 33 | 30 |
| 78 | Philippines | 9.2 | 6.6 | 6.6 | 6.1 | 5.7 | 8.5 | 43 | 40 | 32 | 34 | 26 |

## Copyright, sources and definitions

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January/February).

These documents are the property of World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. They include data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD). Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the end of each document under the heading "External links". These documents may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © Open Doors International.

The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: "Any hostility experienced as a result of one's identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians". This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/.

# Reporting period

The WWL 2025 reporting period was 1 October 2023 - 30 September 2024.

# Brief country details

| South Sudan: Population (UN estimate for 2024) |
|---|
| 11,277,000 |

| South Sudan: Religious context | Number of adherents | % |
|---|---|---|
| Christians | 6,862,000 | 60.8 |
| Muslim | 717,000 | 6.4 |
| Hindu | 240 | 0.0 |
| Buddhist | 270 | 0.0 |
| Ethnic religionist | 3,645,000 | 32.3 |
| Jewish | 0 | 0.0 |
| Bahai | 740 | 0.0 |
| Atheist | 5,000 | 0.0 |
| Agnostic | 46,300 | 0.4 |
| Other | 570 | 0.0 |
| *OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.* | | |

*Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024*

## Map of country



## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

| South Sudan: Main Persecution engines | Main drivers |
|---|---|
| Organized  corruption and crime | Organized crime cartels or networks, Government officials |
| Clan oppression | Ethnic group leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family |
| Dictatorial paranoia | Government officials |

*Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.*

## Brief description of the persecution situation

In South Sudan, persecution stems from both violence and pressure, with these two elements being deeply interlinked. This situation is worsened by ethnic tensions, rivalries within religious denominations, and strained relationships between churches and factions such as state authorities,

rebel groups and tribal leaders. Despite constitutional safeguards, the reality is grim. The ongoing conflict fosters organized crime and violence, often targeting Christians, leading to church burnings and attacks on church leaders. Fear is rampant among Christian communities, exacerbated by acts of retaliation for speaking out against corruption. Amidst this volatility, churches and church-run institutions strive to maintain stability, support peace initiatives and provide aid, highlighting their crucial role in a country beset by turmoil.

## Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- *Violence against churches and clergy*: Christian leaders and churches in South Sudan have been targeted, including incidents where the South Sudan People's Defense Forces (SSPDF) looted and occupied churches, assaulted clergy and detained religious leaders.
- *Sexual violence against Christians*: There have been reports of sexual violence targeting Christians, contributing to the severe challenges faced by the Christian community in the country.
- *Ethnic and political conflicts*: Broader ethnic and political conflicts in regions such as Warrap and Jonglei states have led to the destruction of churches, attacks on clergy, and the displacement of thousands, exacerbating the risks faced by Christians.
- *Government inaction*: There has been a lack of effective government intervention to protect Christian leaders and resolve conflicts, leaving religious communities vulnerable.

## Specific examples of positive developments

The church remains a source of hope, stability, and humanitarian aid in a country ravaged by destructive internal conflict.

Christianity is predominantly Roman Catholic in South Sudan and is most prevalent among the peoples of Al Istiwai state, namely the Madi, Moru, Azande and Bari.

Other principal Christian denominations are Episcopal, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Sudan Interior, Presbyterian Evangelical, and African Inland churches. Smaller congregations of Eritrean Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Greek Orthodox also exist (Source: IRFR 2023 South Sudan).

## Christian communities and how they are affected

- *Communities of expatriate Christians:* Expatriate Christians are not isolated from other Christian communities and so are not included as a separate category in WWL scoring and analysis.
- *Historical Christian communities:* This category is made up of the Roman Catholic Church and traditional Protestant churches, to which the majority of Christians belong. Church life has been seriously affected by the civil war and Christians continue to suffer persecution arising from ethnic divisions.
- *Converts:* This category mainly includes those who have converted from Islam or traditional African religions. Converts from Islam are the most persecuted Christian group, especially in the northern part of the country where the Muslim population is dominant.
- *Non-traditional Christian communities:* Church groups in this category have been exposed to violence from the civil conflict and have also faced pressure from some Historical Christian communities.

## Areas where Christians face most difficulties

There are no particular hotspots.

## Position on the World Watch List

| South Sudan: World Watch List | Points | WWL Rank |
|---|---|---|
| WWL 2025 | 47 | 76 |
| WWL 2024 | 46 | 74 |
| WWL 2023 | 46 | 72 |
| WWL 2022 | 43 | 74 |
| WWL 2021 | 43 | 69 |

South Sudan scored 47 points and ranked #76 on WWL 2025. The one-point increase in South Sudan's overall persecution score was largely due to a 0.5-point rise in pressure in the *Church sphere*, now at 8.1 points. Christians in South Sudan face severe persecution, especially from armed groups targeting churches, pastors and Christian communities across the country. The violence is compounded by the challenges posed by local community leaders, making it difficult for Christians to practice their faith freely. The country remains mired in civil conflict, with a lack of rule of law in many regions, further destabilizing the situation for Christians. The violence score remained steady at the extreme level of 15.6 points. The violence, including unjustified killings and church attacks, has continued to drive high overall scores for South Sudan.

## Persecution engines

| South Sudan: Persecution engines | Abbreviation | Level of influence |
|---|---|---|
| Islamic oppression | IO | Weak |
| Religious nationalism | RN | Not at all |
| Ethno-religious hostility | ERH | Not at all |
| Clan oppression | CO | Strong |
| Christian denominational protectionism | CDP | Weak |
| Communist and post-Communist oppression | CPCO | Not at all |
| Secular intolerance | SI | Not at all |

*(table continues below)*

| South Sudan: Persecution engines | Abbreviation | Level of influence |
|---|---|---|
| Dictatorial paranoia | DPA | Medium |
| Organized corruption and crime | OCC | Strong |

*The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.*

**Organized corruption and crime (Strong)**

South Sudan suffers from pervasive corruption: It had a Corruption Perceptions Index score of 8 points in 2024 (ranking bottom: #180 out of 180 countries) which is significantly below the already low regional average for Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite being rich in natural resources like oil, gold and livestock, as well as having access to the Nile River, these resources have been exploited to fuel conflict rather than development. High-ranking officials amass wealth for themselves, often at the expense of the general populace, leading to severe food shortages affecting millions. This culture of corruption also offers a free pass to those who wish to persecute Christians—or any other groups—since there is virtually no system in place to hold anyone accountable. The consequences are dire, as highlighted by the high numbers of people facing severe food insecurity: Some 8.9 million people (78% of the population) according to the World Bank (Macro Poverty Outlook, April 2024).

## Clan oppression (Strong)

In South Sudan, ethnic tensions run high, notably between the two largest groups, the Dinka and the Nuer, which have been represented by the political and military leaders President Salva Kiir and Riek Machar, respectively. Between 2013 and 2019, these two groups were embroiled in an armed conflict that deeply fractured the nation along ethnic lines. The situation complicates the religious landscape as well, since around 32% of the population practices traditional religions primarily concentrated in rural areas. While these traditional beliefs are not explicitly anti-Christian, they come with their own set of cultural and religious rituals that often conflict with Christian values. New Christian converts are therefore often caught in a difficult position, facing significant pressure from their ethnic groups to participate in traditional rituals and clan-based activities. The unwillingness to comply often exposes these converts to ostracization or worse within their communities.

**Dictatorial paranoia (Medium)**

The authoritarian rule of President Salva Kiir has fostered a climate of oppression and fear. While not directly targeted at Christians, the regime's oppressive actions have a broad impact on the majority-Christian population. Kiir's efforts to consolidate power have often involved stirring ethnic strife and suspending or purging anyone within the government who opposes him. This calculated approach led to the destructive civil war from 2013 to 2019, during which regime supporters either directly persecuted Christians or tacitly allowed persecution to occur. The national unity government established in 2020 has done little to ameliorate this situation, with President Kiir initially declaring his intention to run for re-election in 2024; however, he has since declared that elections will not take place until December 2026 (Al-Jazeera, 14 September 2024).

# Drivers of persecution

| South Sudan: Drivers of persecution | IO | RN | ERH | CO | CDP | CPCO | SI | DPA | OCC |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | STRONG | | | | MEDIUM | STRONG |
| Government officials | | | | | | | | Medium | Medium |
| Ethnic group leaders | | | | Medium | | | | | |
| Non-Christian religious leaders | | | | Weak | | | | | |
| Religious leaders of other churches | | | | Weak | | | | | |
| Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs | | | | Medium | | | | | |
| One's own (extended) family | | | | Medium | | | | | |
| Political parties | | | | | | | | Weak | |
| Organized crime cartels or networks | | | | | | | | | Strong |

*The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.*

### Drivers of Organized corruption and crime

- ***Organized crime cartels and networks in conjunction with Revolutionary or paramilitary groups (Strong):*** Organized crime syndicates and paramilitary groups often work hand-in-hand in South Sudan. They fuel a cycle of lawlessness and anarchy that significantly impacts Christians and other religious communities. The inability to enforce the rule of law due to these strong, illicit networks results in numerous incidents of church looting and property destruction, with zero legal repercussions for the perpetrators.
- ***Government officials (Medium):*** The corruption at the highest levels of government is intricately tied with these networks of organized crime. This unfortunate linkage effectively renders the government unable or unwilling to provide protection for Christians and other vulnerable groups. The confluence of these elements creates a complex web of organized corruption and crime, making it exceedingly difficult for any positive change to take hold.

### Drivers of Clan oppression

- ***Revolutionary or Paramilitary groups (Medium):*** The civil war in the period 2013-2019 was essentially an ethnic battle, marked by gruesome acts of torture, abductions and killings. Armed

paramilitary groups representing different ethnic factions were responsible for these human rights violations. Many of these groups did not hesitate to target vulnerable populations, including aid workers and Christians, in their quest for dominance. Churches were often targeted and destroyed, demonstrating the volatile relationship between these armed groups and religious communities.

- *Ethnic leaders (Medium):* Community leaders often exert strong social control through informal local rules. These rules can sometimes be aimed explicitly against Christians, especially those who are active in evangelizing in remote areas. The power and influence of these leaders in their communities mean that these rules can be very effective in marginalizing and oppressing Christian converts.
- *One's own (extended) family (Medium):* Within African Traditional Religion (ATR) communities, family plays a significant role in the spiritual life of individuals. A family member who converts to Christianity often faces extreme pressure to revert to ancestral practices and beliefs.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- *Government officials (Medium):* The pervasive culture of impunity and silence is perpetuated by government officials and their affiliates. These officials enable and often turn a blind eye to the atrocities committed throughout the country, thus adding another layer of oppression. This culture of silence effectively muzzles Christians and other activists who try to speak out against the injustices and human rights violations.

## The Persecution pattern



WWL 2025 Persecution Pattern for South Sudan
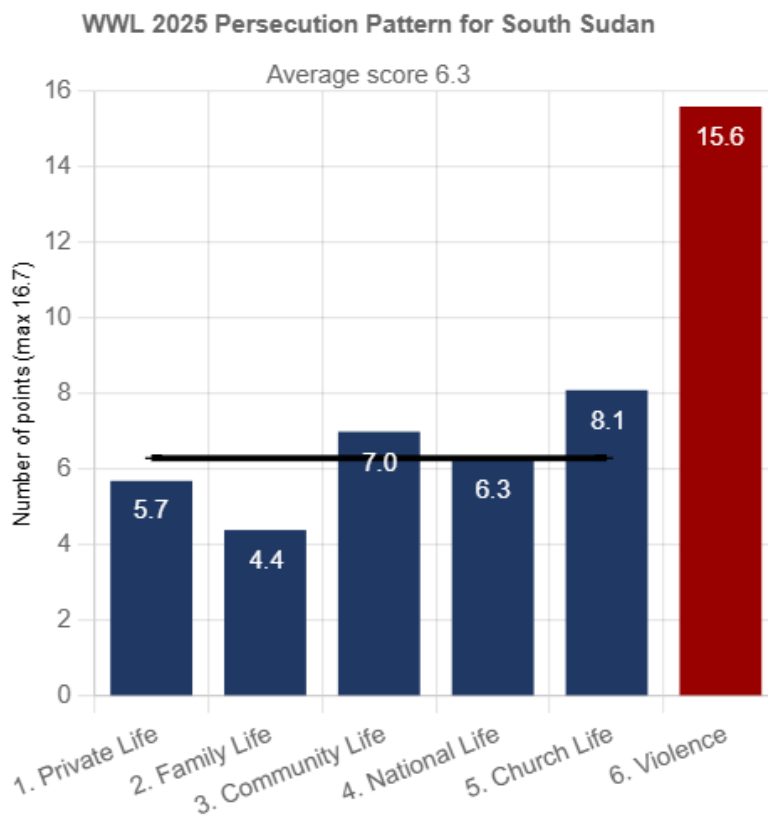
The WWL 2025 Persecution pattern for South Sudan shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in South Sudan was 6.3 points, a very slight increase from 6.2 points in WWL 2024.
- The *Church sphere* experienced the highest pressure with a score of 8.1 points (an increase from 7.6 points in WWL 2024), followed by the *Community sphere* with a score of 7.0 points.
- The violence score remained extreme at 15.6 points, similar to the score recorded in WWL 2024.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

*In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2025 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the "WWL Scoring example" in the WWL Methodology, available at: https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/.*

### Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

**Block 1.9: It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians. (3.00 points)**

In some parts of South Sudan, meetings for Christians are very challenging due to the presence of groups that actively target them, particularly in states where security is a serious problem. In areas dominated by ATR (African Traditional Religion), converts face immense difficulty and must practice their faith discreetly. For example, in the past, 150 members of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Tonj State were detained following complaints about the denomination's influence. Additionally, Christians have been targeted in states experiencing significant security challenges, further complicating their ability to gather safely.

**Block 1.2: It has been risky for Christians to conduct acts of Christian worship by themselves (e.g. prayer, Bible reading, etc.). (2.25 points)**

In some communities in South Sudan, particularly those with a Muslim majority, restrictions on private Christian worship have been reported in areas such as Renk and Abyei, though these incidents are not widespread. In these regions, challenges are shaped not only by religious differences but also by local dynamics and ethnic affiliations, which often intertwine with issues of power, identity and access to resources. This intersection creates an environment where religious expression, especially for minorities like Christians, can be fraught with difficulties depending on the specific locality.

**Block 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (2.00 points)**

While South Sudan, as a predominantly Christian country, generally does not pose widespread risks for owning or keeping Christian materials, specific areas like Abyei and ATR-dominated regions highlight the localized difficulties Christians can face. ATR communities often perceive Christian symbols and practices as a direct threat to their cultural and spiritual systems. This perception is heightened in regions where ATR remains a principal influence, leading to social repercussions such as ostracism, denial of community resources, and, in extreme cases, expulsion for those who openly possess or distribute Christian materials. For example, in the regions inhabited by the Missirya nomads in Abyei, restrictions on the circulation of Christian materials make private ownership particularly

dangerous. Local norms and pressures often discourage individuals from openly practicing their faith, and such challenges are magnified for converts who face significant scrutiny.

***Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (2.00 points)***

- Faith and culture are deeply intertwined in ATR-dominated regions, and Christianity is often viewed as an external or disruptive influence. Converts to Christianity, in particular, face social ostracism and hostility, as their faith is seen as rejecting communal values and traditions. Public expressions of Christian beliefs, such as opposing ritual practices or proclaiming the exclusivity of Christian teachings, often provoke backlash from ATR adherents, who may view these actions as an affront to their heritage.
- In traditional Christian-dominated areas, individuals who change denominations also encounter challenges, especially when their expressions of faith align with non-traditional or newer churches. Such individuals are often accused of betraying their communities or diluting the established doctrines of the traditional church. Public criticism, exclusion from communal activities, and other forms of marginalization are common.
- Governments, especially in politically volatile contexts, often crack down on individuals who express their faith in ways that challenge the status quo. Whether through written declarations, public speeches, or other forms of expression, those who tie their faith to justice or political critique risk government scrutiny and repression. For example, in the past, a pastor who declared that leading civil war leaders would be deposed was arrested and detained. His faith-based statement was interpreted as a political threat, leading to his incarceration.

## Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

***Block 2.11: Spouses of converts have been put under pressure (successfully or unsuccessfully) by others to divorce. (2.75 points)***

In many parts of South Sudan, the pressure placed on a convert's spouse to renounce their Christian faith can be extremely intense. This is particularly evident in areas dominated by ATR, where conversion to Christianity is often seen as a betrayal of deeply rooted cultural and spiritual values. The social and familial dynamics in these regions make it exceedingly difficult for converts to practice their faith openly, and spouses are frequently subjected to significant pressure to abandon their Christian beliefs in order to preserve harmony within the community or family. Even in predominantly Christian areas, similar challenges arise when one spouse changes denominations, especially from an established church to a non-traditional or newer denomination. In such cases, societal expectations and family traditions often create an environment of tension and conflict, as these shifts are perceived as a rejection of communal religious norms.

***Block 2.3: Christians have been hindered in celebrating a Christian wedding for faith-related reasons. (2.50 points)***

The celebration of Christian weddings in South Sudan can present various challenges, depending on the region and local dynamics. In areas with the presence of armed groups, weddings can become targets for attack due to the public nature of such ceremonies and their symbolic significance. In ATR-dominated areas, Christian weddings face additional obstacles as they do not adhere to the traditional

ritual systems upheld by ATR communities. Such deviations are often met with hostility, as they are perceived as a rejection of cultural norms. This resistance can make it particularly difficult for couples to hold ceremonies that reflect their Christian beliefs. Even within predominantly Christian regions, challenges persist for those who change denominations, especially when moving from established churches to newer ones, such as Pentecostal movements.

***Block 2.10: Christian spouses and/or children of Christians have been subject to separation for prolonged periods of time by circumstances relating to persecution. (2.50 points)***

In ATR communities, forced separation is frequently used as a means to punish converts who abandon traditional beliefs for Christianity. This practice aims to isolate converts from their families and communities, effectively severing their social and support networks. Similarly, in areas dominated by historical Christian denominations, individuals who change their affiliation to newer or non-traditional church groups can also experience forced separation. This form of punishment is intended to deter others from following a similar path and to reinforce communal adherence to established norms.

***Block 2.12: Christian spouses of non-Christians have been excluded from the right or opportunity to claim custody of the children in divorce cases. (2.50 points)***

In ATR-dominated areas, converts to Christianity often encounter this form of punishment as a way to dissuade others from abandoning traditional beliefs. Families and communities may exclude converts from inheriting property or resources, arguing that their rejection of ATR disqualifies them from participating in familial or communal benefits tied to traditional practices. In regions dominated by traditional Christian denominations, individuals who change their affiliation to newer or non-traditional church groups may similarly be denied inheritance. This form of ostracism serves as a punitive measure, reinforcing adherence to established religious norms while stigmatizing those who deviate from them. Denial of inheritance not only deprives individuals of material resources but also symbolizes their exclusion from the social and cultural fabric of their communities.

## Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

**Block 3.4: Christians been hindered in sharing community resources because of their faith (e.g. clean drinking water). (3.00 points)**

In ATR-dominated areas, Christians—especially converts—are often excluded from grazing lands, water sources, and other community-managed resources due to their refusal to participate in traditional rituals tied to these assets. For instance, grazing land may require ritual blessings, and those who reject such practices are denied access. Similarly, community-administered wells or water sources may be restricted, forcing Christians to travel long distances for essential resources. In conflict-affected areas, armed groups often exacerbate these challenges by targeting Christians and limiting their access to critical supplies as a means of control or punishment. Even in predominantly Christian regions, those who decide to join non-traditional church groups face exclusion from community resources managed by established denominations.

**Block 3.6: Christians have been hindered in participating in communal institutions, forums, etc., for faith-related reasons. (3.00 points)**

Christians in South Sudan face significant challenges in participating in community institutions and forums, which are critical in a country where local communities wield extensive power over resources, governance and conflict resolution. In ATR-dominated areas, Christians, particularly converts, are often excluded from these spaces due to perceptions that their faith conflicts with traditional practices and values. This exclusion denies them a voice in decisions about resource allocation, land use, and communal matters, further marginalizing them within their communities. Similarly, in predominantly Christian regions, individuals who join non-traditional churches face restrictions from historical church communities that dominate local institutions. Such barriers prevent their involvement in leadership roles or decision-making processes, compounding their isolation and limiting their ability to advocate for their needs. The exclusion of Christians from these fundamental institutions undermines their social and economic standing, leaving them marginalized in a society where community forums play a pivotal role in shaping daily life and broader development.

*Block 3.3: Christians have been under threat of abduction and/or forced marriage. (2.75 points)*

South Sudan, a nation marked by ongoing conflict and instability, is home to numerous armed groups operating across its territories. These groups, driven by various political, ethnic and ideological motives, have frequently targeted Christians and aid workers. Christians have been abducted in many instances, often used as leverage in negotiations or subjected to violence as a form of intimidation against religious communities. Aid workers, including those working with Christian organizations, have also faced abductions, harassment and even death, particularly in regions controlled by armed factions. The volatile security situation makes it perilous for anyone openly practicing Christianity or providing humanitarian assistance, as these acts are often viewed by militant groups as aligning with opposing ideologies or foreign agendas. This widespread targeting disrupts the lives of Christians and hampers critical humanitarian efforts.

*Block 3.1: Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (e.g. for not meeting majority religion or traditional dress codes, beard codes etc.). (2.25 points)*

Christians in South Sudan face pervasive harassment and threats within their communities, making their daily lives extremely challenging. The intensity of these challenges varies across the country but is particularly severe in regions dominated by ATR. Converts to Christianity in ATR areas often face relentless persecution for rejecting traditional beliefs, which are deeply ingrained in the cultural and spiritual identity of these communities. This persecution extends to their families, with individuals being ostracized, denied inheritance, or subjected to forced separation as a means of punishment. In areas where armed groups operate, the risks for Christians are even higher, as public expressions of faith, such as attending church or organizing religious gatherings, are often seen as threats to these groups' authority or ideological agendas. This creates an environment of constant fear and isolation, further hindering their ability to practice their faith. Even in predominantly Christian regions, individuals who change denominations—particularly those moving from established churches to non-traditional ones—encounter similar, though somewhat less intense, forms of harassment and social

exclusion. They may be denied inheritance or pressured by their families and communities to abandon their new affiliation.

## Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

***Block 4.5: Christians have been discriminated against when engaging with the authorities (local administration, government, army, etc.) for faith-related reasons. (3.00 points)***

Christians in South Sudan often face discrimination when engaging with national or local authorities, particularly in regions where African Traditional Religion holds significant influence. Locally, ATR leaders maintain strong ties to community governance structures, fostering an environment where Christians, especially those suspected of challenging injustices or traditional norms for faith-based reasons, encounter hostility. These individuals are often viewed as a threat to the established order, leading to targeted harassment, denial of services, or exclusion from community decision-making processes. Their faith-based advocacy for justice and equality is frequently misconstrued as defiance against traditional authority or community cohesion, resulting in ostracism, loss of livelihood opportunities, or even threats of violence. At the national level, the government has been known to view certain Christian groups with suspicion, particularly those involved in social justice initiatives or humanitarian efforts, interpreting their activities as politically motivated or aligned with foreign interests.

***Block 4.6: Christians have been barred from public office, or has promotion been hindered for faith-related reasons. (3.00 points)***

Christians in South Sudan often face discrimination in professional and administrative settings, where they are frequently overlooked for promotion or denied opportunities despite their qualifications. In regions where ATR influences local governance or traditional power structures prevail, Christians—particularly converts or those from non-traditional denominations—are viewed as outsiders, leading to deliberate undervaluing of their contributions and hindering their career progression. At the national level, Christians advocating for justice or reform are sometimes perceived as politically or ideologically aligned with foreign agendas, further limiting their chances for advancement in government or other sectors. Positions of influence are often allocated based on allegiance to dominant ethnic, political or religious groups, marginalizing Christians and creating an environment where merit is overshadowed by cultural and political biases, perpetuating systemic inequality.

***Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (3.00 points)***

- Christian organizations in South Sudan face significant challenges in their operations due to a combination of governmental restrictions, armed group activity and societal pressures. The authoritarian nature of the government fosters an atmosphere of paranoia, where Christian organizations—especially those engaged in humanitarian or missionary work—are viewed with suspicion. This often results in heavy monitoring, bureaucratic hurdles and restrictions on their activities, which limit their ability to serve communities effectively. Licenses and permissions to operate are frequently delayed or denied, and organizations that speak out against injustices or advocate for marginalized groups risk being labeled as politically motivated or aligned with foreign agendas.

- In regions controlled by armed groups, Christian organizations face even greater risks, including harassment, extortion, and violence. Missionaries and aid workers are often targeted, their activities disrupted, and their safety compromised.
- ATR-dominated areas add another layer of difficulty, as traditional leaders and communities may view Christian humanitarian efforts as threats to their cultural and spiritual systems. This can lead to outright rejection of their initiatives or significant societal pressure that forces them to scale back their operations.

***Block 4.14: Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished. (3.00 points)***

- In South Sudan, those who persecute Christians often act with impunity, as perpetrators of violence, including armed groups that destroy churches, attack communities, and kill Christians, are rarely apprehended. The government's unwillingness to confront these acts of persecution, whether due to political considerations, fear of alienating powerful local leaders, or the fragile state of the justice system, leaves victims without recourse.
- In ATR-dominated areas, the influence of traditional leaders and the prioritization of customary norms over the rule of law further shield perpetrators from accountability. Crimes such as church burnings, forced displacements, and physical assaults are frequently dismissed as internal matters, with local authorities either complicit or unwilling to challenge entrenched power structures.
- At the national level, this failure to address violence against Christians reflects a broader disinterest in protecting religious minorities.

## Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

***Block 5.5: Churches have been hindered from organizing Christian activities outside church buildings. (3.50 points)***

In South Sudan, Christians face immense challenges in organizing their activities, even within the confines of church compounds, let alone outside them. Past incidents where armed groups attacked churches, including those where individuals sought refuge, illustrate the grave risks Christians face even in spaces traditionally regarded as sanctuaries. These violent intrusions, aimed at worshippers and clergy alike, have created an atmosphere of fear that significantly restricts their ability to hold services or other gatherings. If Christians struggle to organize themselves within the supposed safety of their compounds, the prospect of conducting activities outside the church becomes even more daunting, given the heightened exposure to threats from armed groups, societal hostility and local power structures.

***Block 5.3: Christian communities have been hindered in building or renovating church buildings or in claiming historical religious premises and places of worship which had been taken from them earlier. (3.25 points)***

Christian communities in South Sudan face immense difficulties in building churches, particularly in ATR-dominated regions and areas controlled by armed groups. In ATR strongholds, churches are often seen as threats to traditional practices, leading to societal resistance, bureaucratic hurdles and even vandalism of construction efforts. Armed groups further exacerbate these challenges by targeting

church projects as symbols of Christian presence, stealing materials, threatening laborers and halting progress through violence. These overlapping obstacles make it extremely difficult for Christians to establish places of worship, leaving many without safe spaces to gather and practice their faith.

**Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (3.25 points)**

In South Sudan, where political rights scored a dismal -3/40 and civil liberties 4/60 in the Freedom in the World 2024 South Sudan report, the repressive environment severely undermines freedoms, including those of Christian communities. This lack of liberties is evident in the strict monitoring of Christian teaching, preaching and published materials. Authorities, driven by suspicion and paranoia, closely watch religious leaders and organizations, particularly when they address issues that touch on governance, justice or social concerns. In one notable instance, a pastor who preached about politics from a Christian perspective was detained for over 30 months, underscoring the risks religious leaders face when their messages are perceived as challenging the state or societal norms.

**Block 5.11: Pastors or other Christian leaders (or their family members) have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons. (3.25 points)**

In South Sudan, particularly in ATR-dominated areas and regions where armed groups are active, pastors and other church leaders face not only harassment but also significant threats of violence. Christian leaders are often specifically targeted, with numerous incidents of killings and kidnappings recorded in past years. These attacks aim to intimidate and destabilize Christian communities, as leaders are seen as central figures in organizing and maintaining the faith.

## Violence

*Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:*

*1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced. Possible reasons for this may be:*

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

*2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:*

- *Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).*
- *In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.*

• *Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.*

### *3. The use of symbolic numbers:*

• *In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.*

| South Sudan: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire | WWL 2025 | WWL 2024 |
|---|---|---|
| 6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)? | 10 * | 10 * |
| 6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons? | 10 * | 10 * |
| 6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons? | 0 | 0 |
| 6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons? | 0 | 0 |
| 6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)? | 10 * | 10 * |
| 6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons? | 10 * | 10 * |
| 6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians? | 10 * | 10 * |
| 6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)? | 100 * | 100 * |
| 6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons? | 100 * | 10 * |

*(table continues below)*

| South Sudan: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire | WWL 2025 | WWL 2024 |
|---|---|---|
| 6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons? | 100 * | 10 * |
| 6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons? | 1,000 * | 100 * |
| 6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons? | 1,000 * | 10 * |

In the WWL 2025 reporting period:

- **Christians killed**: At least ten Christians have been killed across various regions of the country, with these acts often orchestrated by armed groups, particularly targeting youth. This violence has been most notably observed in Torit (Eastern Equatoria State), Jonglei State, Yei River County (Central Equatoria State), and Gogrial East County (Warrap State). In addition to the killings, these attacks are frequently accompanied by the kidnapping and sexual assault of women and girls.
- **Churches/public church properties attacked:** At least ten Christian churches and church properties were attacked in various regions of the country, with these incidents becoming increasingly common in many areas. These deliberate attacks are often perpetrated by rival groups or armed factions and occurred in both rural and urban settings. Such attacks were reported in places like Torit (Eastern Equatoria State), Jonglei State, Yei River County (Central Equatoria State), and Gogrial East County (Warrap State). In some cases, even state forces have been implicated in these acts of destruction, further escalating tensions and undermining the security of religious communities.

## 5 Year trends

The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

**5 Year trends: Average pressure**

| South Sudan: WWL 2021 - WWL 2025 | Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life |
|---|---|
| 2025 | 6.3 |
| 2024 | 6.2 |
| 2023 | 6.2 |
| 2022 | 5.5 |
| 2021 | 5.7 |

The most recent WWL reporting periods indicate a stabilization in average pressure at around 6.2/6.3 points.

**5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life**



South Sudan: WWL 2021 - WWL 2025 Pressure scores in each sphere of life
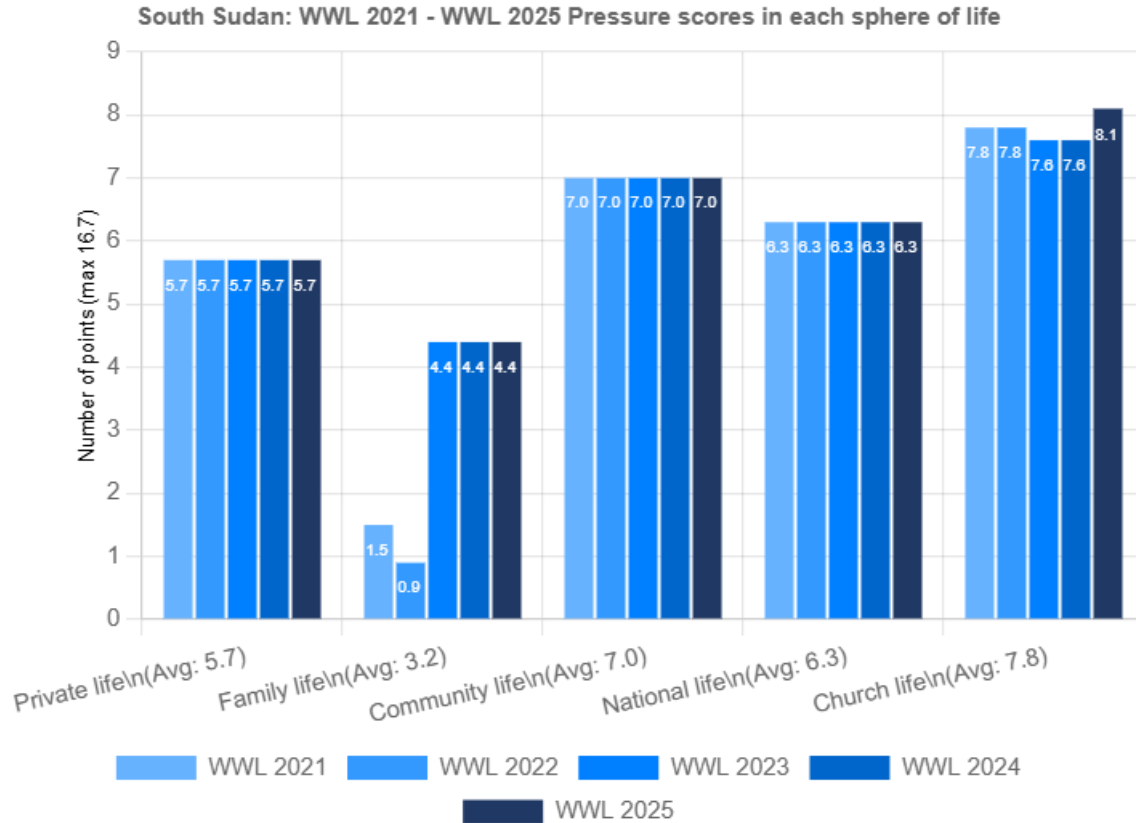
The chart above highlights that the highest levels of pressure on Christians are consistently observed in the *Church sphere* (with a 5-year average of 7.8 points) and the *Community sphere* (with an average of 7.0 points). In contrast, the *Family sphere* has the lowest five-year average, scoring 3.2 points. Except for the *Family* and *Church spheres*, which exhibit some fluctuations across reporting periods, the *Private, Community,* and *National spheres* have remained stable over the last five WWL reporting cycles.

**5 Year trends: Violence against Christians**

As can be seen in the red chart below, violence against Christians in South Sudan has remained at an extreme level over the past five World Watch List (WWL) reporting periods, with an average score of 15.2 points, reflecting very high levels of violence. Churches have been attacked, humanitarian services disrupted, and church leaders targeted during this time. The highest violence score was recorded in the WWL 2024 and WWL 2025 reporting periods. If South Sudan had scored higher in the pressure spheres, its overall score would place it among the highest-ranking countries on the World Watch List.

South Sudan: WWL 2021 - WWL 2025 Violence scores
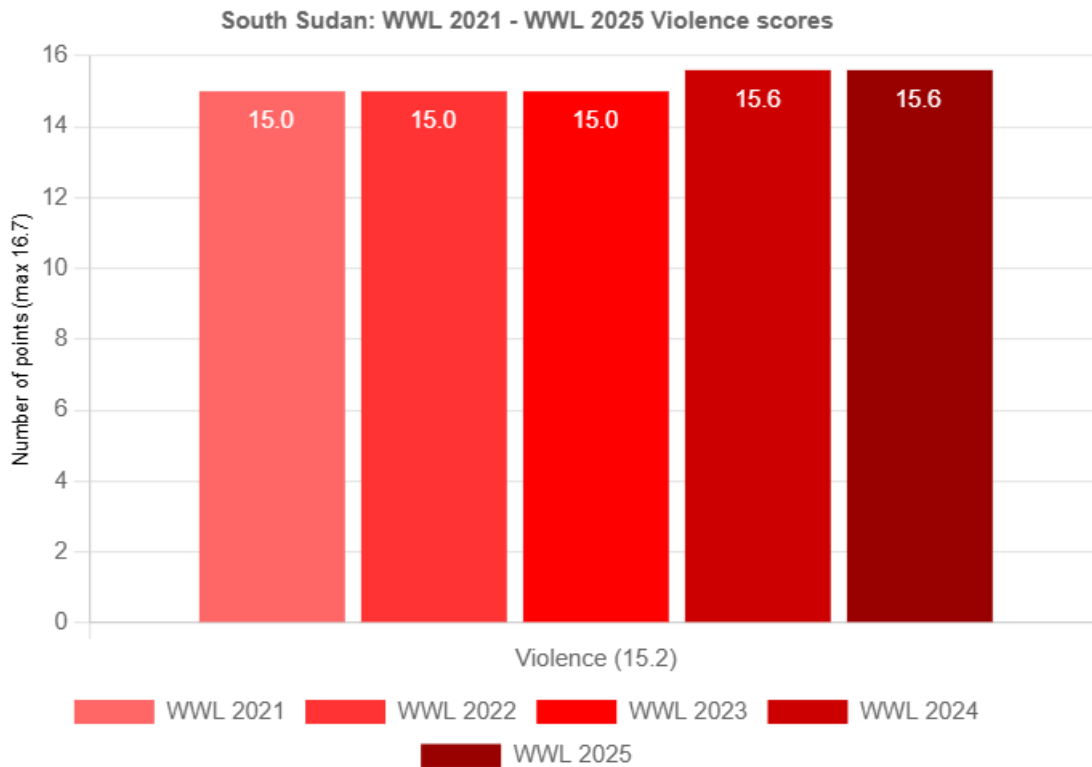


## Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

In South Sudan, the prolonged civil war has been a major instigating factor for the increase in sexual violence against women (HRW 2022 South Sudan country chapter). According to a report from the Secretary-General to the Security Council (UN, 3 June 2020, pp.27-28), sexual violence in Sudan has reached "appalling levels of brutality" and is "often committed with political and ethnic undertones". The South Sudanese authorities have failed to ensure accountability for grave violations and impunity continues to fuel violence, with civilians bearing the brunt of widespread attacks, systematic sexual violence and the ongoing presence of children in fighting forces.

Against this backdrop of complex ethnic and political tensions, it is difficult to discern the exact motivation behind the violence experienced by Christian women and girls. It is clear, however, that the use of rape as a weapon in armed conflict makes women and girls more susceptible to religious persecution by those opposed to their Christian faith, which mimics the war practices in the country. Regional experts indicate that rape and gender-based violence is the most common form of persecution affecting Christian women and girls (HRW, 14 December 2022). A country expert explains: "Sexual violence is an issue in South Sudan. Sexual slavery, rape, abductions and forced marriages are among the types of sexual violence suffered by South Sudanese [women]." The trauma experienced prevents many of these women from forming stable relationships.

Furthermore, South Sudan is one of six countries in the world which has not specified a minimum age for marriage hence leaving a loophole for early and forced marriages. It has the eighth highest rate of child marriage in the world, with 52% of girls marrying by the age of 18 (Girls Not Brides South Sudan, accessed 10 March 2025). The prevalence of this practice, most often carried out because of extreme poverty and to secure much-needed assets for families, (including cattle, money and other gifts via the

payment of a bride price), creates an obvious avenue of repression and control of young female converts. Elders and ethnic leaders have reportedly forced young girls to marry people that they had never met. Within these marriages, women and girls are exposed to domestic and sexual violence.

Women are also impacted by the killing of men and forceful conscription of boys as child soldiers, as are left without any way to fend for themselves while mourning the loss of their husbands and sons (see below).

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

South Sudan continues to face a dire human rights and humanitarian crisis. Fighting between government, opposing forces and their respective allied militias - as well as inter-communal violence - causes death, injuries and displacement. South Sudan grapples with Africa's largest refugee crisis, with over 2.2 million South Sudanese refugees hosted in neighboring countries (UNOCHA, 2024). The South Sudanese civil war that lasted for almost seven years contributed to the mass recruitment of men, particularly of boys who were halted in their education and targeted instead to become child soldiers (FP, 8 January 2022). Within a context of ongoing fragility and insecurity, recruitment as a means of repression and control has become the most common form of persecution affecting men and boys (UN News, 23 June 2020). Whilst exact figures are lacking, thousands of children are believed to have been recruited into armed forces and groups by both sides of the conflict since 2013, with aid organizations fighting for their release (UNICEF, 18 November 2021; World Vision, 6 May 2022).

Instability continues as the South Sudanese government has failed to meet critical milestones set out by the peace deal, including legislative and institutional reforms ahead of the general elections originally scheduled for December 2024 (HRW 2024 South Sudan country chapter). However, the government has since decided to postpone general elections until December 2026 (Al-Jazeera, 14 September 2024) - see below: *Trends Summary* #4.

Men run the risk of being killed by government forces upon suspicion of being part of rebel forces. Reports indicate that religious leaders and Christian workers are particularly in danger. As a regional expert writes: "Religious leaders have been singled out for criticism by both the government and the opposition, using media reports and social media accounts. In certain circumstances, this has resulted in interrogations, security intelligence summonses, and even incarceration. As a result, freedom of expression has been restricted, and public debate has been silenced."

The killing of men and forceful conscription of boys as child soldiers has a catastrophic impact on families and communities. As a country expert explained: "Women are left without any way to fend for themselves while mourning the loss of their husbands and sons. The resultant anguish greatly weakens their capacity to do anything either economic or development related."

## Persecution of other religious minorities

Non-Christians in South Sudan include Muslims (located particularly in the northern part of the country) and followers of traditional African religions in remote areas. Both groups have been affected by the ongoing fighting and the repression caused by the dictatorial regime.

## Trends Summary

**1) Human rights violations and a culture of impunity continue**

Despite the formation of a unity government in February 2020, South Sudan remains mired in a deeply troubling pattern of human rights violations and a pervasive culture of impunity. The formation of the unity government was supposed to mark the end of the civil war and pave the way for a new era of peace and stability. However, the reality has been far bleaker. Human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, and widespread sexual violence, persist with little to no accountability. This failure to protect human rights is compounded by the country's challenge of uniting over 60 diverse and often conflicting tribes under a regime that continues to operate with dictatorial tendencies. While the end of the civil war was meant to create opportunities for all citizens, including Christians, the ongoing disregard for human rights and the entrenched culture of impunity suggest that meaningful change is unlikely in the short term without significant political and cultural shifts.

**2) Armed groups pose a perpetual threat**

The security situation in South Sudan remains dire due to the continued activity of multiple armed groups, which have significantly ramped up their operations in recent years. These groups have been responsible for widespread atrocities, including killings, kidnapping, rape and the destruction of property. Humanitarian workers, in particular, have been frequent targets of these attacks, and there have been instances where Christians have been specifically targeted. The challenge of identifying and holding these armed factions accountable has only worsened the situation, making it nearly impossible to bring perpetrators to justice. The presence of these armed groups not only endangers the fragile peace process but also perpetuates an environment of continuous insecurity. Despite ongoing efforts by the United Nations, including the imposition of sanctions in 2024 and the deployment of peacekeeping missions, these threats show no sign of diminishing in the near future. This ongoing violence reflects a broader systemic crisis, characterized by political instability, societal fractures and a faltering economy.

**3) The conflict in Sudan is having serious implications for South Sudan**

The ongoing conflict in neighboring Sudan has had significant and destabilizing implications for South Sudan. Over the past two years, there has been a noticeable increase in activity along the border areas, with reports indicating that the flow of weapons into South Sudan has escalated. This influx of arms has fueled further violence, particularly in the border regions where conflicts have resulted in numerous deaths. Additionally, the humanitarian situation has worsened as thousands of people fleeing the conflict in Sudan have sought refuge in South Sudan, placing an even greater strain on an already overstretched humanitarian response. The increased tensions and violence at the border highlight the interconnectedness of the conflicts in the region and the fragile state of security in South Sudan.

**4) Elections postponed due to fear of catastrophic outcomes**

As South Sudan approached its long-delayed national elections scheduled for December 2024, there was growing concern among the international community about the potential for "catastrophic" outcomes if the process was not handled carefully. In the years following the signing of the peace

agreement, there have been some efforts to prepare for these elections, but the process has been fraught with delays and setbacks. The deeply entrenched divisions between the major civil war factions, represented by President Kiir and Riek Machar, remain unresolved, adding to the fear that the elections could reignite conflict rather than solidify peace. The international community voiced concerns that without a transparent, inclusive, and well-managed electoral process, the elections could lead to further instability, undermining the fragile peace that has been achieved so far. This fear was not unfounded, given the history of violence and political turmoil that has plagued the country for years; as a result, voting has been postponed until December 2026.

## Further useful reports

Further background information per country and a selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-background/
- https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/.

## External Links

- Copyright, sources and definitions: Background country information - https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-background/
- Copyright, sources and definitions: Persecution dynamics - https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/country-dossiers/
- Church spectrum today - additional information: IRFR 2023 South Sudan - https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/south-sudan/
- Persecution engines description: Corruption Perceptions Index - https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/south-sudan
- Persecution engines description: Macro Poverty Outlook, April 2024 - https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099615204052432105/pdf/IDU1234e5f7814685140591bccb191f487baf02f.pdf
- Persecution engines description: Al-Jazeera, 14 September 2024 - https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/9/14/south-sudan-postpones-december-election-by-two-years
- Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (3.25 points): Freedom in the World 2024 South Sudan - https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-sudan/freedom-world/2024
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: increase in sexual violence - https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/south-sudan#9554c6
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: report - https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/report/conflict-related-sexual-violence-report-of-the-united-nations-secretary-general/2019-SG-Report.pdf
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: gender-based violence - https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/12/1131712
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Girls Not Brides South Sudan - https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/south-sudan/
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: (UNOCHA, 2024). - https://www.unocha.org/south-sudan
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: child soldiers - https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/08/south-sudan-child-soldiers-riek-machar/
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: UNICEF, 18 November 2021; - https://www.unicef.org/southsudan/press-releases/unicef-welcomes-release
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: World Vision, 6 May 2022 - https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/WVSS-Child%20soldier%20report%202022-update_FINAL.pdf

- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: peace deal - https://southsudan.igad.int/index.php/agreements/345-signed-revitalized-agreement-on-the-resolution-of-the-conflict-in-south-sudan
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: (HRW 2024 South Sudan country chapter). - https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/south-sudan#:~:text=From%20January%20to%20March%202023,to%20conflict-related%20sexual%20violence.
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: December 2026 - https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/9/14/south-sudan-postpones-december-election-by-two-years