

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

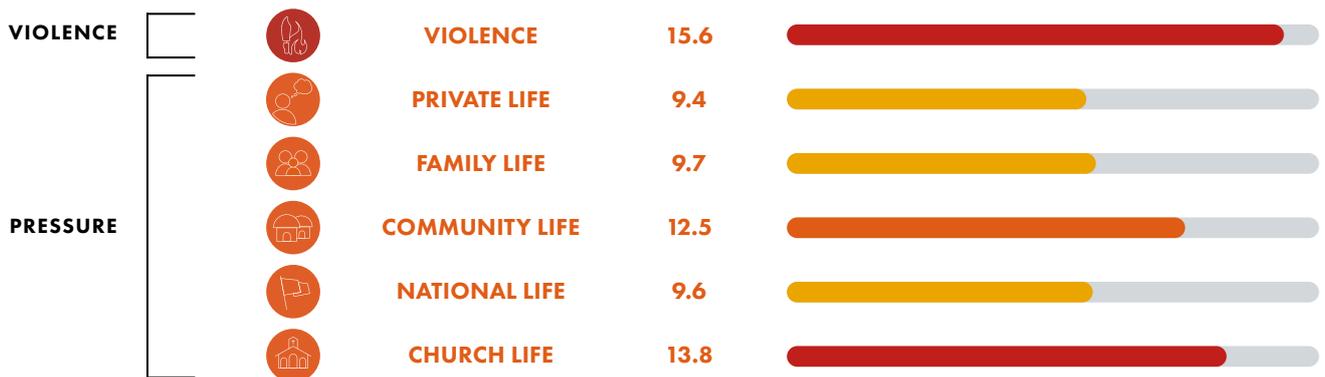
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**23**

## Burkina Faso



### 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

Christians are being targeted and killed by jihadists, and churches are destroyed. The impact of jihadists in the country has expanded to cities that were previously beyond their reach. Christians from Muslim backgrounds experience the most violations from family and community, who reject them and try to force them to renounce their Christian faith. Christians are afraid to express their faith in public because of such threats.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Ibrahim Traore

### POPULATION

22,103,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

5,166,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	5,166,000	23.4
Muslims	12,295,000	55.6
Ethno-religionists	4,513,000	20.4
Agnostics	122,000	0.6

Source<sup>2</sup>

Burkina Faso has suffered years of political turmoil and a military dictatorship. In 2014, an uprising forced President Blaise Compaoré out of power after 27 years of rule. A military coup followed in 2015, but leaders agreed to transfer power to a civilian government through elections. In 2022, another coup took place in the country. Political freedom and the situation of human rights have greatly improved since then. However, in September, there was yet another coup by Ibrahim Traore. He has since been named transitional leader, ousting Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, who had seized power just in January. Burkina Faso remains one of the least developed countries in the world. Nearly 80% of people practice subsistence farming for their survival. Large parts of the country remain contested between jihadist groups, ethnic militias, and security forces.

Christians have made a huge contribution in stabilizing and leading the country to independence, but they

have also been targeted by jihadists, which are growing in influence in the Greater Sahel region. Militant Islamic groups operating in the country include Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), Islamic State West Africa (ISWA), Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Murabitoun, Ansar Dine and Boko Haram. Christians in the country suffer from a lack of security. Many have been targeted and killed in 2021 and 2022. Christian women and girls risk being abducted, raped, and forcibly married. Instances of sexual assault have reportedly increased as extremist groups exploited the insecurity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to expand control. Christian boys on the other hand are often recruited into militant forces, which also serves to weaken the Christian church. In light of such pressure, many Christians are forced to flee their homes altogether.

## How the situation varies by region

The northern and eastern parts of the country are the main areas where Christians experience the most pressure and violence, particularly outside the main cities. In the western part of the country, ethno-religious groups also put pressure on Christians. As the influence of the jihadists is increasing, most of the regions that were considered relatively safe are becoming unsafe.

<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 is affected?

## Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriate Christians are not involuntarily isolated and are therefore not treated as a separate WWL category.

## Historical Christian communities

The Roman Catholic Church is the most dominant Christian denomination in the country. Most of the country's political leaders have been Catholics. Catholics face fewer violations compared to other Christian groups due to their large numbers.

## Converts to Christianity

This category includes Christians of Muslim or traditional African religious background. Converts from a Muslim background experience the most serious persecution from their families and communities.

## Non-traditional Christian communities

Baptist, Evangelical, and Pentecostal congregations are concentrated mostly in the major cities. They are targeted more often than historical Christian groups by Islamic militants.

## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Islamic oppression blended with Clan oppression:

Burkina Faso has experienced several Islamist attacks in recent years, especially in the northern region and occasionally in the capital. These can be seen as violent attempts at "Islamizing" the country. *Ansar ul Islam* was formed in 2016 and has tried to impose its laws in the northern part of the country through violent and non-violent means. There is also *Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslim* ("Group supporting Islam and Muslims") operating in the country and has ties with local militant groups. Currently, they seem to be more focused on combatting the French presence and countries allied to France. Its preachers influence the youth into blaming their misfortune on the French and on the corruption of morals through the West. There have been attacks on churches and Christians by Islamic militants and some churches have stepped up security, fearing further attacks may be planned.

A country researcher writes: "Generally speaking, the ethnic groups are tolerant but with the increasing influence of Islamic expansion, Muslim leaders from various tribes have become sources of persecution." Converts from a Muslim background experience the most serious persecution from their families and communities.

### Organized corruption and crime:

In many countries in the Sahel region, organized corruption is enabling the jihadists to recruit, buy weapons, and operate with impunity. A country researcher indicated: "There is a high level of corruption in governance. Crimes such as robbery and kidnapping are being committed in various regions of the country. The government is doing little or nothing to contain such crime, even in the capital city, Ouagadougou."



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# How are men and women differently affected?

## WOMEN

Islamist groups are influential in the regions, particularly the east, and the central government is weak. In this context, there is a high potential for abduction by militants. Females may be forced into marriage, used for labor, and put under intense pressure to convert to Islam. Sexual violence is a common tool for attacking Christian communities. In particular, daughters of Christian leaders are targeted for rape. Converts from an Islamic or traditional religious background face further pressure, including forced marriage, denied education, family expulsion, death threats, and house arrest.

- Denied access to social community / networks
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Targeted seduction
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

## MEN

Islamic militant groups operating in the Sahel region often forcefully recruit their members from countries such as Burkina Faso. Christian men and boys are targeted for forceful recruitment and physical attacks. The abduction and killing of Christian men causes fear and trauma in Christian communities, alongside economic fragility for families. Many men and boys often flee to safer areas in the country, neighboring countries, or countries abroad. Converts from a Muslim background face further challenges; conversion is considered a betrayal by some families, resulting in rejection and denial of inheritance.

- Abduction
- Discrimination / harassment via education
- Forced to flee town / country
- Military / militia conscription / service against conscience
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	23	71
2022	32	68
2021	32	67
2020	28	66
2019	61	48

*The Burkina Faso score increased by almost 3 points. Christians have experienced an increase in violence and pressure due to escalating pressure and persecution throughout the country. Jihadist activity has expanded, and many churches and Christian schools are being forced to close down. The Church and Community spheres of life are under particularly high pressure. Targeting killing of Christians has created an environment of fear, with many Christians being too scared to attend church services or send their children to school. Jihadist groups have also replaced the government in areas under their control. This phenomenon is exacerbated by political uncertainty in the country. The situation in neighboring countries like Niger and Mali also contributes to the insecurity in Burkina Faso. There are ongoing ethnic conflicts with religious dimensions. As a result, converts to Christianity and other Christian groups face high levels of pressure and, if the current situation is not addressed as soon as possible, it is likely that Burkina Faso will further become an even more dangerous and extremely fragile state.*



# Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **June 2022:** JNIM militants burned a Protestant church in the village of Pabouga (Partiaga, Tapoa).
- **May 2022:** JNIM militants entered the village of Kindi (Andemtenga, Kourittenga). The militants banned western education, sale of alcohol, and church prayers.
- **March 2022:** JNIM militants burned a church in the village of Bourgou (Manni, Gnagna).
- **July 2022:** JNIM militants entered three churches in the Burkina-Faso-Nigerien border village of Dabonti (Kantchari, Tapoa). The militants assaulted and whipped worshippers, pastors, and co-pastors.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians internally displaced	Christians forced to flee their countries
2023	10*	10*	5000	100*
2022	100*	100*	100*	0

*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, particularly converts from Islam, face hostile reactions if they discuss their faith with others. This is a new phenomenon and was not something ingrained in society previously. In some remote areas, Christians must ensure they do not have Christian materials at home because militants can show up at their doors and search for such evidence. Conversion, though not forbidden by law, is opposed by Muslims in certain areas and can lead to a convert being treated as an outcast.

## Family life

In some schools where leaders or founders are predominantly Muslim, Christian students face pressure to receive Islamic teaching. This has been reported in cities like Bobo Dioulasso and others, and even in the capital Ouagadougou. It has been reported that Islamic militants killed teachers who did not teach Islam. Converts lose their inheritance rights. All Christian groups must make sure they do not celebrate Christian weddings or festivals in areas prone to attacks by jihadists.

## Community life

Christians are targeted, especially in the northern region, which shares a border with Mali. Soum Province seems to be the epicenter of Islamic militant activity. Here, Christians have been kidnapped and security forces attacked. The Ansar al-Islam movement has launched attacks and intimidated school teachers into replacing French with Arabic as the language of

instruction in schools. Schools that do not teach Islam have been burned down. Many Christians have fled their homes. Forced marriages have also been used as a weapon to force female converts to return to Islam. Where Christians are a minority, they are often hindered from accessing community resources.

## National life

Churches experience difficulties in obtaining permits from the administrative authorities for things like purchasing land. The spread of anti-Christian sentiment has helped create a mindset that regards Christians as enemies in certain parts of the country. In northern, eastern, and western parts of the country where Islam is strongly represented, and radical ideology has a foothold, Christians are increasingly regarded as the enemy.

## Church life

Despite the fact the country is officially secular and Christians make up over 20% of the population, many churches live in fear of attack and are closely monitored by militant groups and community leaders in the northern, eastern, and western parts of the country. In many predominantly Muslim communities, church work among the youth is very restricted. The sale or distribution of Bibles and Christian materials is not impeded by the state, but these activities cannot be carried out by converts from traditional African religions or Islam without risking serious trouble.

# International obligations & rights violated

Burkina Faso has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
3. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
4. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Burkina Faso 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)
- Christian converts from a Muslim background are ostracized, faced with opposition by their families, and threatened with loss of inheritance (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians and their activities are monitored by militant groups (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christian female converts run the risk of being forcibly married to Muslim men (ICCPR Art. 23; CEDAW Art. 16)
- Perpetrators of violence against Christians are sometimes left unpunished (ICCPR Art. 2)



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## Situation of other religious minorities

Islamic radicalization is growing in Burkina Faso. The peripheries of the country are under the influence of Islamic militants and mosques and madrassas increasingly teach radical versions of Sunni Islam, thus causing even Sufi Muslims to be under threat. In these areas, there is no place for religious minorities. It was even reported that teachers in schools were threatened to hold Quran classes or face repercussions. Anti-Islamic sentiment is rising in Burkina Faso among other vigilante armed groups.



A beneficiary of an Open Doors' relief distribution project that helped 2,100 people with vital food aid.

## Open Doors in Burkina Faso

Open Doors started working in Burkina Faso in 2019, as jihadist violence increased radically. Our vision is to see the church increasingly able to respond biblically to persecution by spiritually empowering Christians and caring for the most affected.

#### 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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