

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

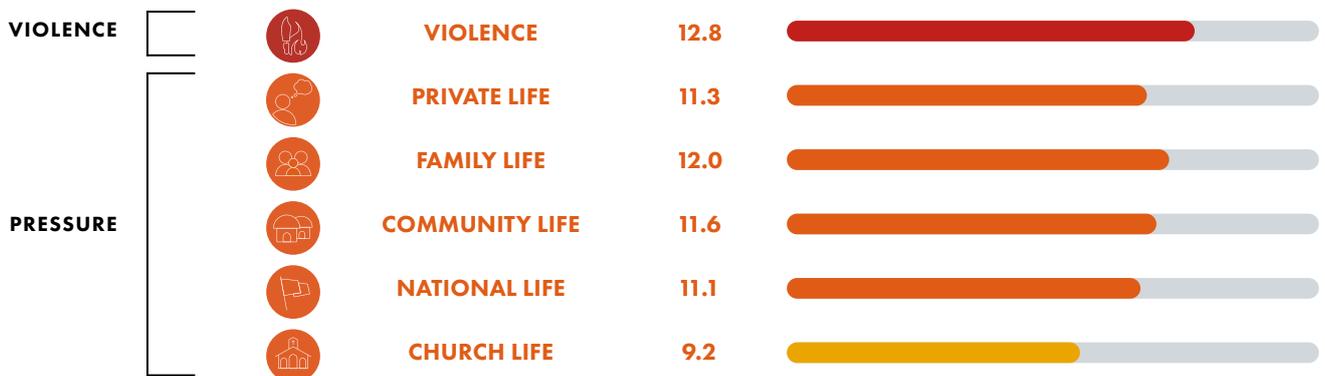
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**33**

## Indonesia



### 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

Converts to Christianity from Islam commonly experience pressure (such as isolation and verbal abuse) and very occasionally violence from their families. In hotspots, like West Java or Aceh, radical Islamic groups exert a strong influence on local politics. Once a church is seen to be proselytizing, it becomes a target. In some regions, non-traditional church groups (and even Catholics) struggle to get permission for building churches and are often ignored by local authorities. In the reporting period, violence against Christians decreased and no Christians were killed for their faith by Islamic extremists.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Joko Widodo

### POPULATION

279,135,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

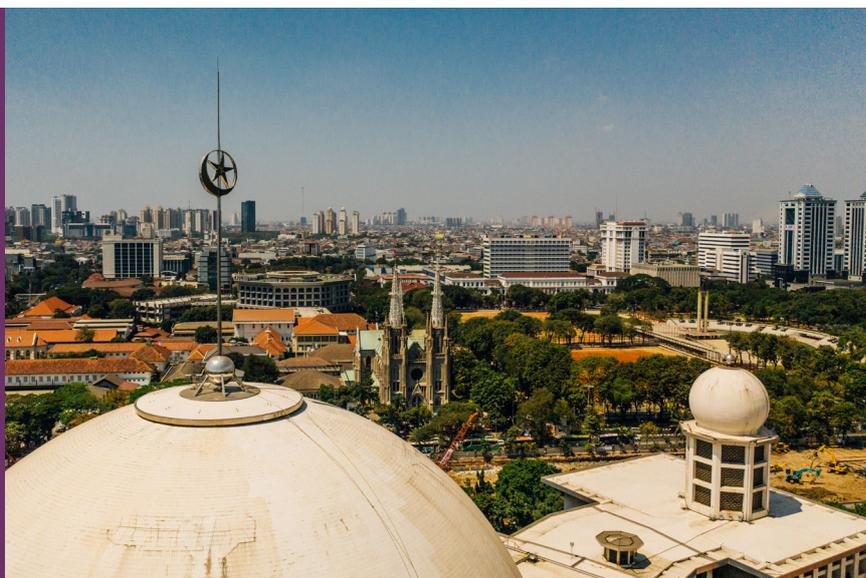
34,185,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	34,185,000	12.2
Muslims	221,562,000	79.4
Others*	6,595,100	2.4
Ethno-religionists	6,086,000	2.2

\*OTHERS include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Source<sup>2</sup>

Indonesia is the fourth most populated country in the world and the largest economy in South East Asia. It consists of 17,000 islands and is one of the world's largest democracies. Moderate Islam is being challenged as society moves towards conservative Islam. In the 2019 elections, President Widodo chose conservative Islamic cleric Maa'ruf Amin as his vice-president in order to counter allegations slandering his religious credentials. Aceh province is ruled by Sharia law, and several other provinces have introduced Sharia by-laws. Another example of Indonesia's shifting position was a row about the mandatory wearing of Islamic attire, especially in schools.

Christianity is a major religion in eastern Indonesia, while Islam is strong in the western and central parts, especially on the most populous island, Java. In May 2022 security forces [arrested](#) 22 suspected extremists in Central Sulawesi, connected with the East Indonesia Mujahideen (MIT) group, who had pledged allegiance

to the Islamic State. In the WWL 2022 reporting period, MIT carried out two attacks that killed eight Christians. This group was finally decimated by the government, thereby sending a strong signal about its efforts to curb terrorism. The leader of Islamist movement *Jamaah Khilafatul Muslimin* was arrested in June 2022 on charges of treason for staging "subversive" motorcycle rallies calling for an Islamic caliphate. The threat from Islamic extremism remains high in Indonesia. Christian men, especially church leaders and Christian converts from Islam, remain vulnerable to attacks from both Islamic militants and mostly local government officials.

## How the situation varies by region

The most violations against Christians are experienced in Aceh, the only province governed by Sharia law. Churches were closed there on a large scale in October 2015 and the building of new churches is virtually impossible. Converts to Christianity from Islam in Aceh face the strongest pressure. Other regions where violations are experienced include West Sumatra (Sumatera Barat), Banten, West Java (Jawa Barat) and East and Central Java (Jawa Timur and Jawa Tengah). Recently, violence has been highest in the province of Central Sulawesi, with the killing of eight Christians in two attacks within the previous reporting period, by radical Islamic group MIT. It remains to be seen if such attacks cease after security forces confirmed the death of MIT's leader in September 2021.

<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

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

### Historical Christian communities

Historic communities include the Roman Catholic Church and churches related to various ethnicities, such as the Batak Christian Protestant Church. They are monitored and experience opposition if they are growing in number. Historical churches in poorer regions like Papua, East Nusa Tenggara and Mentawai are subject to aggressive [Islamization attempts](#), especially among children.

### Converts to Christianity

Converts to Christianity from a Muslim background are closely monitored and put under pressure to give up their new faith. Similarly, on the predominantly Hindu island of Bali, someone who converts to Christianity will experience strong pressure from their family and community.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

Baptists and Pentecostals are targeted by communities and radical Islamic groups if they proselytize. Neighbors will often attempt to hinder the building of new churches, and authorities can delay issuing permits.

## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Islamic oppression:

Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world. Although the Constitution guarantees religious freedom, various regions are governed by Islamic by-laws, including Sharia law in the Province of Aceh. The province of West Sumatra passed a new law recognizing that the customs of the province are based on [Islamic law](#). Despite some radical Islamic groups being banned, they continue to wield significant influence, often re-emerging under a different name. Money from Saudi Arabia is pouring into Indonesia for educational purposes and has the effect of bringing Wahhabi ideology into the country. Radical Islamic leaders instigate hatred against Christians and other religious minorities via their teaching in mosques and in the media. At times, they have even masterminded attacks. Several conservative Muslim political parties, such as the PKS, are known for pushing their goal of setting up a purely Islamic nation.



# How are men and women differently affected?

## WOMEN

While the Indonesian government has recognized the ongoing issue of gender inequality, patriarchal gender norms, child marriages, and high maternal mortality rates prevail. It is often challenging for victims to report incidents and access justice. Christian women and girls are threatened with divorce, which would result in losing physical and economic security. Many women choose to keep their new faith secret, fearing violence if discovered. Occasionally, single Christian converts may be pressured into marriage. Christian women are also marginalized through enforced dress codes, frequently required to wear a hijab.

- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Violence – physical

## MEN

In Indonesia, both female and male Christians face violations of their rights. However, for men this occurs less in private areas of life. Instead, reports indicate that prominent male figures like Christian pastors and activists are the primary targets of public religious discrimination. They can face accusations and have to stand trials for charges such as “inciting religious

hatred.” The presence of radical Islamist groups in the region has also been a threat.

- Incarceration by the government

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	33	68
2022	28	68
2021	47	63
2020	49	60
2019	30	65

*The total score remains almost unchanged, with a decrease of 0.4 points. While the violence score decreased as well, a deadly attack against Christians has been reported in Central Maluku in January 2022. The scores for pressure in all spheres of life remain relatively unchanged (except for the Family sphere). With dozens of radical Muslims having been arrested by the authorities and attacks foiled, organized groups of radical Muslims do not seem to pose a threat against Christians at the moment, but this does not exclude lone wolf attacks.*



Sumijah’s grandson, Daniel, was killed in a bomb detonated by terrorists whilst serving at his church in Indonesia.

# Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **January 2022:** A clash over land-ownership between the predominantly Christian village Kariuw and the predominantly Muslim village Ori village on Haruku Island, Central Maluku, left four residents of Kariuw dead, while dozens of houses and two churches were burned down, and 264 families fled to the jungle.
- **March 2022:** A radical Islamic group prevented the HKBP Betania Rancaekek church in Bandung, West Java, from gathering for worship and disrupted their meetings for several weeks.
- **September 2022:** A public official from the city of Semarang, Central Java, Paulus Ivan Budi Prasetijo, went missing and was found killed in the outskirts of the city. He was a Catholic Christian and, as a whistleblower, was scheduled to testify in a corruption case in court (UCA News, 23 September 2022).

WWL Year	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians' private property damaged or confiscated	Christians' business property damaged or confiscated	Christians internally displaced
2023	1000*	211	10*	600
2022	24	27	0	55

*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

Six religions are officially recognized. Conversion from one religion to another is legal, but conversion from Islam or Hinduism is strictly opposed by families. Converts can be expelled from home or lose custody of their children. In hotspot areas, like Aceh, East Java, Banten, West Java and West Sumatra, everyone needs to be subtle about sharing their faith to avoid provoking anger or strong pressure to return to the Muslim (or Hindu) faith.

## Family life

According to Law Number 23 of 2002, spouses who adopt a child must be of the same religion as the child's biological parents. If the religion of the child's biological parents is not known, the majority religion in the region is used as a basis. The government requires schools to provide Christian teachers for religious studies. However, schools in some provinces struggle to provide them, meaning that Christian children must attend Islamic classes. Many Christian children face bullying at school because of their faith; they are sometimes called "kafir" (unbeliever). Muslim parents often forbid their children from playing with Christian children. Showing the general mindset towards Christians (and other minorities), the ministry of education had to withdraw a religious curriculum for teaching [incorrect doctrines](#) about Christianity in the reporting period. This highlights one aspect



of developing materials that teach about Christianity without having them checked by any Christians, Catholics or Protestants. This seems to have been amended without any problems, but the fact that Christians had not even been consulted is striking (Fides, 29 July 2022).

### Community life

In provinces such as Aceh, West Sumatra, West Java, East Java, Nusa Tenggara Barat and Gorontalo, the number of Christians who are accepted to study at prestigious public universities is very limited. Most scholarships are awarded to Muslim students. Christians can be harassed and ostracized because they are considered unclean, for example by eating pork. There is a growing trend of Muslim-only neighborhoods (Sharia housing complexes). Many Christians find it hard (or impossible) to get promoted and students can deliberately be awarded lower grades in religious education, to keep them from meeting the minimum requirements to become civil servants.

### National life

Christians are becoming more careful about expressing their religious views in public, as statements perceived as opposing Islam can lead to a charge of blasphemy. In many mosque sermons and online smear campaigns, Christians are the object of slander. The Constitution recognizes six faiths (Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism) that should be treated equally, but in practice this is often not the case. A 2006 “Presidential decree on Religious Harmony, Empowering Religious Harmony Forums, and Constructing Houses of Worship” makes it challenging for churches to obtain building permits.

### Church life

Churches face problems in construction, and when registering congregations. According to the 2006 Ministerial Decree, a church can only operate under certain conditions. Its congregation must have at least 90 members, it should have the consent of 60 neighbors from another faith, and it needs the approval of both the regency chief (administrative subdivision of a province) and the inter-faith harmony forum. Even if a permit is obtained, radical groups can hinder access to the church.

In 2020, President Jokowi spoke out against the difficulties faced by believers of minority religions when they want to set up a place of worship. The president had announced that religious minorities should not be discriminated against, and there was some hope the presidential decree would be amended or lifted. So far, nothing of this kind has happened.

## International obligations & rights violated

Indonesia 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)

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

- Christian converts experience pressure and violence from their family and community to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian children are harassed because of their parents’ faith (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christians face employment discrimination because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Churches face obstacles to obtain permits for the construction of new buildings (ICCPR Arts. 21 and 26)
- Christians are killed because of their faith by members of terrorist organizations (ICCPR Art. 6.1)

## Situation of other religious minorities

Outside the six recognized faiths, minority groups [reported problems](#) with stating their religion on national ID cards. In an effort to control, the government supported a smartphone app called Smart Pakem. This allowed citizens to file heresy or blasphemy reports against individuals and groups that have (what the government considers) unofficial or unorthodox religious practices. Human rights organizations criticized the app, saying it could undermine religious tolerance and freedom. The app has now been removed from the Google Play Store and the Apple Store. Muslim minority groups, such as the Ahmadi and Shia, suffer violations and are under scrutiny by both the authorities and radical Sunni groups. The Hindu minority has also been marginalized.



Singing during a church service in Java, Indonesia.

### Open Doors in Indonesia

Open Doors' work in Indonesia to strengthen the church includes:

- Discipling and equipping Christians on how to respond biblically to persecution and be obedient to God, especially the Great Commission
- Facilitating gatherings to foster unity among churches and mission agencies
- Providing Bibles and other Christian literature
- Providing assistance to needy believers through socio-economic empowerment projects
- Providing advocacy and immediate relief to victims of persecution

#### 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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