

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
16

China



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

Like religion in general, the Christian minority is seen as a threat by the Communist Party. The Party is implementing a policy of Sinicization of churches – bringing them in line with and under the control of the Communist Party. In earlier reporting periods, mainly large churches active in politics or inviting foreign guests were monitored and closed; now this can happen to any church, independent or state-sanctioned. However, rather than publicly closing a church (building), authorities simply denied re-opening after meeting restrictions due to the pandemic being lifted in some regions. Since 2018, even before the pandemic, some churches and meeting places simply vanished (meaning mostly that they split up in small groups, often meeting online). Apart from the regulations on religion (regulations to

[meet online](#) and [measures for the financial management of venues for religious activity](#)), there are strict restrictions on the internet, social media and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Bible apps were banned from online stores, but other religious content is still available. If a convert from Islam or Tibetan Buddhism is discovered by community or family, they are usually threatened, physically harmed or reported to the police. Spouses may be pressurized to divorce.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Xi Jinping

POPULATION

1,448,471,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

96,700,000 (OD estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Agnosticism

GOVERNMENT

Communist party-led state



©Unsplash

Context

| Main Religions | Number of adherents | Percentage |
|----------------|---------------------|------------|
| Christians | 96,700,000 | 6.7 |
| Others | 459,708,385 | 31.7 |
| Agnostics | 469,705,644 | 32.4 |
| Buddhists | 239,374,075 | 16.5 |

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

Source¹

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has tightened its grip on society (including all religious activities) and increasingly uses Maoist rhetoric and ideology in order to keep citizens in line. The CCP's main method for reaching the overarching goal of staying in control is the emphasis on Communist ideology. There is rarely a public statement or meeting in which the importance of heeding Communist values is not mentioned. This has been an emphasis from the beginning of Secretary General Xi Jinping's

rule in 2012, but really took off when his name and ideas 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in a New Era' were officially [incorporated](#) into the CCP's Constitution in October 2017. Several universities have opened faculties to teach these ideas, and the CCP has released an app to test its members on them. Much effort is being made to communicate his thinking to citizens through the media, higher education, and even in kindergarten. Those within the Party not deemed loyal enough are purged or sidelined; Christian faith must be abandoned to have a career in public service. The CCP guides teachers in what should be taught through the [content of history textbooks](#). Books promoting atheism, such as '[The Principles of Scientific Atheism](#)' were distributed as textbooks in colleges and among Communist Party cadres. At the CCP congress in October 2022, Secretary General Xi secured a third term of ruling. All seven members of the Politburo Standing Committee appear to have been chosen in such a way that neither their accomplishments nor their advanced age make it likely that they would be able - let alone willing - to challenge Secretary-General Xi's rule or even voice meaningful alternative views.

¹ Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022) (*Adapted according to OD-estimate*)

Chinese churches, whether state-approved or unregistered, are increasingly affected by the CCP's new approach of actively intervening in affairs. Churches are closely monitored and under pressure to teach Communist ideology. The Regulations on religion (Administrative Measures for Religious Groups), introduced in 2020, provide the authorities with the legal basis to intervene. Those rules even govern the selection of leaders. There have been raids on and closures of churches, arrests of leaders and confiscation of Christian materials. These rules have been updated and extended by regulations pertaining to religious ministers.

According to its Constitution, China is atheist. Around 40% of citizens agree with the value of Confucianism, which is praised by the government as being [truly Chinese](#). Since it is more of a philosophy, it can incorporate Communist rulers. The government warns citizens against religious groups and incentivizes them to report illegal religious activities. Churches in Shandong Province (and increasingly elsewhere) have been forced to display government-prepared posters with Bible verses to illustrate the 12 Socialist principles. The state-sanctioned and controlled church associations are: the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM - Protestant) and the Patriotic Catholic Association (CPA). Protestant churches not belonging to the TSPM are considered illegal and called house or underground churches, though they can have hundreds of members.



How the situation varies by region

Converts from a Muslim or Buddhist background from minority ethnic groups arguably face the most severe violations of religious freedom in China, as it is driven by their families and communities. Consequently, hotspots are Xinjiang, Tibet and Western China, as well as the provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan, Qinghai and Ningxia. As Protestant Christians are more concentrated in the provinces of Henan, Zhejiang, Anhui and Jiangxi, and the numbers of Catholic Christians in Hebei are high, those provinces might also be considered as hotspots. However, Christians and Christian churches face restrictions and monitoring countrywide, and reports are coming from almost all provinces. The Communist Party goes to great lengths to limit the flow of such reports, with increasing success in the reporting period.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriate Christian communities experience more freedom compared to other Christian groups, but face monitoring and limitations in their contact with local Chinese churches. However, Chinese authorities throughout the country are cracking down on [foreign Christian missionaries](#), especially South Koreans, but also Americans, Taiwanese and Christians from Hong Kong. The Chinese authorities have published a draft of [new rules](#) for foreigners and their involvement in religious activities in China. These rules are part of a series of tightening laws on religion. The new rules limit the extent of citizens' contact with foreign worshippers in the country. There is a significant decline in the number of expatriate Christians, both due to the aforementioned measures and the restrictions brought about by the pandemic.

Historical Christian communities

This category highlights a unique factor in Chinese Christianity: there are registered and government-recognized churches – the TSPM and the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) – and non-registered, independent churches. On the Roman Catholic side, these independent congregations are the followers loyal to the Vatican. TSPM and CPA-related churches are government-controlled and even if there is no direct censorship, they carefully weigh their words. Leadership elections are state-influenced. TSPM and CPA have each published five-year plans on how their churches will 'Sinicize'. Churches are continuing to publish white papers from the leadership

level on this topic, e.g. Sinicization in a Catholic context. This category is seriously affected by the intensification of control and [Sinicization](#) (also known as Sinification), as well as by the delayed or denied re-opening of churches after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since September 2018, the Holy See has been party to a '[Provisional Agreement](#)' with China on the appointment of Roman Catholic bishops, which was renewed for two years in 2020. The Vatican [extended its agreement](#) with the Chinese government concerning the appointment of bishops for another two years (AP News, 22 October 2022). Despite all criticism and clearly aware of the agreement's limitations, the Vatican has apparently decided that the benefits outweigh the risks. As the content of the agreement continues to be barred from publication, further details are not available. This has not led to any tangible relief of pressure on Catholic Christians.

Converts to Christianity

Converts are either from a Muslim background or from a Buddhist (Tibetan) background. Living in ethnic minority regions, which are becoming ever more volatile, and where some strive for independence, converts are facing pressure from two sides; the government, and family and community. The government restricts any meeting or action it deems political or dangerous. Meanwhile, family, friends and community put converts under pressure to return to the 'true faith', because it is an important uniting factor for ethnic groups, especially when the Communist authorities are imposing an 'Ethnic Unity Law'.

Non-traditional Christian communities

This category is made up of a multitude of Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations under a whole variety of names. On the Protestant side, these (often unregistered) non-traditional churches are also called house churches or underground churches, sometimes also family churches. Unlike several years ago when congregations consisted of hundreds of members and in some provinces met openly in commercial buildings, most house churches have now returned to home gatherings. As a result of the pandemic, many churches have stopped in-person meetings and moved their services online. There have even been instances where online meetings via Zoom, etc., were sometimes interrupted as a result of the regulations to [meet online](#). Consequently, many house churches split up into small gatherings.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Communist and post-Communist oppression:

The main goal of the Communist Party is to maintain power through national unity and by limiting potential threats such as religious and ethnic minority groups. Christians are the largest social body not under complete state control, and therefore seen as dangerous. According to [updated Communist Party rules](#), any member who maintains religious beliefs after a dose of 'strengthened thought education' will be 'encouraged to leave the Party'. Most officials will do everything to secure their position, regardless of whether they are personally convinced by Communist ideology. In many regions of China, Christian activities have been hindered. Although house churches are still targeted the most (especially if involved in youth work), government-controlled churches face restrictions too. Catholics loyal to the Vatican face significant oppression. Muslim and Tibetan leaders are sometimes co-opted by the Communist Party to act as Party officials and limit Christian activities.

Dictatorial paranoia:

President Xi Jinping has consolidated his power in a manner not seen since Mao Zedong, and under Xi the Communist Party has become almost militant in its efforts to attack any perceived threats to its authority. In an effort to maintain control, the Communist Party and government authorities have carefully studied what led to the downfall of Communism elsewhere. One factor is the control of social groups such as Christians, who are seen as alien and connected with foreign, mainly Western, powers. The Party puts real pressure on officials to implement policies and offers incentives.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Women lead many churches, especially house churches, facing the same risk of imprisonment as men. Generally speaking, converts from Muslim and Buddhist backgrounds face the greatest pressure. Their husbands may be pressurized to divorce them because they are seen as traitors to their ethnic group. China's (now-abandoned) one-child policy is notorious for having created a gender imbalance. The consequences of this policy interact with the vulnerability of Christian communities in neighboring countries.

- Abduction
- Forced marriage
- Imprisonment by the government
- Trafficking
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Although they face similar pressure to women, men and boys are at greater risk of being physically abused. Male Christian leaders are particularly targeted for government surveillance. Catholic priests and high-profile house church leaders have been forcibly detained by the authorities. In these instances, men may be physically abused, including being beaten by police officers. While in detention, many men are traumatized. Those under prolonged detention are unable to provide financially for their families. Due to such pressure, some church leaders choose to emigrate.

- Abduction
- Incarceration by the government
- Violence – physical

WWL 5 year trend

| WWL Year | Position on Open Doors World Watch List | Persecution rounded score out of 100 |
|----------|---|--------------------------------------|
| 2023 | 16 | 77 |
| 2022 | 17 | 76 |
| 2021 | 17 | 74 |
| 2020 | 23 | 70 |
| 2019 | 27 | 65 |

The increase of 1.1 points in WWL 2023, after an increase of 1.7 points in WWL 2022, more than four points in WWL 2021, an increase of five points in WWL 2020, and seven points in WWL 2019, shows a continually deteriorating situation and reflects that the strong pressure on churches is felt nationwide. The violence score remained on the same level as last year, and many churches were forced to continue gathering in smaller groups or even move completely online. The scores for pressure in the 5 Spheres of life slightly increased across all spheres because of the new restrictions and limitations on using the virtual sphere for religious purposes.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **August 2022:** Authorities raided a house church meeting of Christians from ERCC in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, and physically harmed church members.
- **February 2022:** Echeng District Court in Ezhou in Hubei province [sentenced](#) Pastor Hao Zhiwei to eight years in prison on charges of fraud, as she had refused to join the TSPM.
- **December 2021:** Chen Yu, owner of the “Wheat bookstore” in Linhai, Zhejiang province, received a [seven-year](#) sentence for alleged “illegal business operations” by printing and selling Christian books. His appeal was rejected.
- **December 2021:** The authorities [closed](#) a church-affiliated school in Shunde in Guangdong province; on 18 December, a school near Fuzhou in Fujian province was closed.

| WWL Year | Christians' private property damaged or confiscated | Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed | Christians detained | Christians imprisoned or punished by the government |
|----------|---|--|---------------------|---|
| 2023 | 10* | 1000* | 100* | 100* |
| 2022 | 100* | 3000 | 1000* | 100* |

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

Access to online Christian content is possible (if not blocked) but strictly monitored by the government. Christians are already preparing for more restrictions, and a good deal of self-censorship is practiced. The government increasingly blocks website content and limits the space of available content, e.g. Amazon’s audiobook service Audible for reading religious books and other Bible apps in the Apple Store have been banned, as have Koran apps. This is a result of the implementation of recent regulations, some dating back to 2018, but others only came into force in March 2022. There have been several reports from areas where the authorities have forcefully entered homes of Christians. Converts to Christianity with a Muslim or Buddhist background mostly keep their faith secret, as they could be threatened by local authorities or even detained. Party and military members who convert to Christianity may also keep their conversion a secret. Children and youths are not supposed to be exposed to religion.

Family life

Children under 18 years are banned from attending religious activities, and Christian students are forced to study unbiblical teachings in the atheist school system. Children of Christians have been forced by authorities in several parts of the country to sign statements confirming they are ‘not religious’. Children are put under pressure to reveal their parents’ religion. The Party warns that religious activities are regarded as illegal behavior, which leaves many children confused and sometimes angry with their Christian parents. The introduction of the ‘Children speak in unison’ plan led one observer to state that the educational reforms ‘aim to mold model citizens from pre-school’. In some areas, Christian children, especially those with convert parents, have been threatened with not being allowed to graduate or not being accepted for further studies.

Community life

Monitoring (e.g. by CCTV, neighborhood committees and security guards) is widespread, and high-profile Christians come under special scrutiny. The Communist Party maintains a reward system to encourage security guards in the community to report any irregularities. This grid management system is tight and used for several purposes, including monitoring neighborhoods. Church leaders are often summoned for interrogation at local police stations, such as in the case of the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu. Employment discrimination is more common in public sector jobs (e.g. all religious believers are excluded from government positions that require Party membership). There are rare cases where the government has pressed private employers to terminate contracts with religious believers. Christian converts from Muslim or Buddhist backgrounds are put under pressure by family and community to return to their original faith and face discrimination until they do.

National life

China’s Constitution recognizes freedom of religion, but allows the state to define ‘normal’ religious activity. The best illustration of this in the WWL 2023 reporting period is that of Chang Yuchun and Li Chenhui. Both of them received a seven-year sentence from Xian Municipal Intermediate Court, Shaanxi province, for alleged “illegal business operations” by printing and selling Christian books. Their appeal was rejected.

There are many means of discriminating against religious minorities; denying permits, conducting financial investigations aimed at uncovering foreign links, and shutting down churches due to alleged building or fire violations. Christians who depend on government subsidies (such as the elderly) are sometimes put under pressure by local Party officials to choose between their faith and the government

subsidy. The text, entitled 'Opinions on Providing Judicial Services and Protection for Accelerating the Modernization of Agriculture and Rural Areas', [provides guidelines](#) under paragraph 9 for implementing the overall national security concept and for promoting harmony and stability in rural regions. Religious activities are listed among various other dangerous elements in society.

Church life

All communities of Christians are being monitored. Church activities are not just monitored by the presence of agents, but also by CCTV cameras watching the pulpit, congregation and surrounding church compound. Preaching at Sunday services must be pre-approved, but the situation varies. Monitoring of unregistered churches has increased in this reporting period, with more house churches experiencing harassment and obstruction once their activities are discovered. Most house churches were forced to form small groups and gather in different locations, maintaining a low profile to avoid detection. As one country expert summarized: "Prior to COVID-19, the government had begun shutting down large, unregistered congregations. During lockdown, no public meetings were allowed, so believers continued meeting online. It is highly unlikely that unregistered groups will attempt to resume large in-person meetings. The future of small group meetings, which many are currently utilizing, is uncertain." Many house churches switched to (limited) online meetings. Churches that are officially closed for good lose everything, including property and assets. This occurs more in rural areas. [New regulations](#) for religious institutions were made public in May 2021. Among other goals, Article 4, Article 9 and Article 39 are telling. They emphasize the cultivation of a reserve of patriotic religious talents. The regulations also mandate that courses should include a series of classes on ideological and political theory. Learning Xi Jinping's Thought should be included as the institution's goal. With this Sinicization campaign, pastors in registered churches are increasingly pressured to promote Party teaching in the churches. The Communist Party also introduced a new regulation concerning [religious clergy](#); Article 3 highlights that religious clergy should love the motherland, support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and adhere to the direction of the [Sinicization](#) of religion in China. If these regulations are enforced strictly, freedom for churches will shrink considerably. Legislation on religious online activities that took effect in 2022 may result in restrictions on online gatherings. Churches are trying to [navigate](#) these new rules in an effort to stay online (China Source, 12 April 2022).

International obligations & rights violated

China 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 \(CRC\)](#)

**China has signed but not ratified the ICCPR.*

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

- Christians are monitored by the state and their activities are often hindered and disrupted (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Churches are hindered from obtaining legal status and those officially registered are subject to heavy state interference (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian leaders are imprisoned on charges of national security (ICCPR Art. 9)
- Children of Christians have been harassed and discriminated against because of their parents' faith (CRC Art. 2)
- Christian children are hindered from attending religious services and receiving religious education (CRC Art. 14)

Situation of other religious minorities

Just as churches have been closed or destroyed, so have Muslim, Buddhist, Taoist, Jewish and other houses of worship. Religious minorities such as Muslims, Buddhists and adherents of Falun Gong report severe societal discrimination in employment, housing and business. Muslims in Xinjiang suffer severe human rights violations, with up to one million held in re-education camps, which the government claims are necessary in the fight against radical Islam. A report by [UNHCR](#) documented these atrocities, but China put [pressure](#) on the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and on its personnel not to publish the report, as it would “intensify politicization and bloc confrontation in the area of human rights, undermine the credibility of the OHCHR and harm the cooperation between OHCHR and member states.” Some have been released. Details of these camps have been revealed in reports such as the China Leaks, and satellite images show the scale of the camps. Tibetan Buddhists face strong pressure from the government, especially under the new Ethnic Unity Law.



Open Doors in China

Open Doors provides training and Christian literature to Christians who suffer persecution, intolerance and discrimination, including Muslim and Buddhist background Christians through local churches and partners. We strive to support Christians in China through indigenous leaders.

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.
