

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

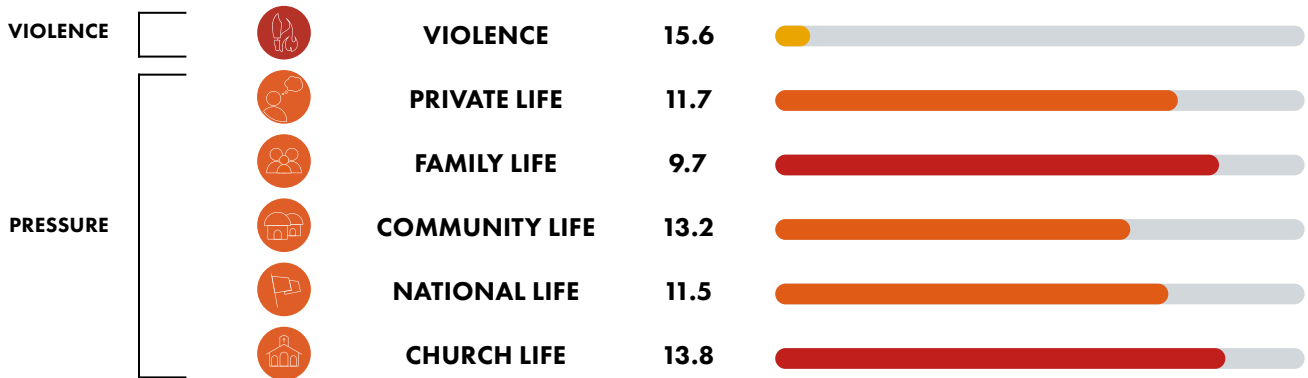
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**45**

## COMOROS



### 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

Religious minorities, especially Christians, are subjected to extreme constraints when it comes to openly practicing or even discussing their faith. For Christian families, particularly converts from Islam, the challenges are even more acute. They have to send their children to Madrasas or they face alienation. Public worship or even conversing about Christianity in public spaces can be construed as proselytizing, which is a punishable offense. Reports continue to emerge of local communities alienating individuals suspected of converting to Christianity, thereby creating an environment that is antagonistic to religious freedom. Female converts may find themselves under house arrest as a form of social and familial penalty. Given these conditions, Christians, and especially those who have converted from Islam, are compelled to practice their faith clandestinely. Such a restrictive religious landscape significantly undermines the freedom of religion and poses severe challenges to religious minorities in Comoros.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Azali Assoumani

### POPULATION

926,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

4,700<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Federal Presidential Republic



## Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	4,700	0.5
Muslims	911,000	98.4
Ethno-religionists	8,800	1.0
Agnostics	1,200	0.1

Source<sup>2</sup>

After years of political instability following independence from France in 1975, the Comoros archipelago underwent a democratic transition in 2006. Islam is the established state religion through the Constitution, and the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam sets the norms for life in Comoros. 98% of the population is Muslim. The Constitution declares [equality of rights](#) for all individuals regardless of religion or belief, but proselytizing is prohibited by law and punishable by a fine and imprisonment, except for Sunni Islam. The law provides for the deportation of foreigners who proselytize.

There are only a handful of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Christian NGOs, however, face discrimination through governmental restrictions in advertising and operations.

Comorians hold to the matriarchal family system, uncommon in other parts of Africa. Women are tasked with the role of initiating marriage and building a home for the family. Men still hold the mantle of religious leadership, but it is women who hold a strong influence within the family. Women suffer from inferior legal status, as well as the cultural practices of polygamy, unilateral divorce, and child marriages. The country additionally faces issues of high population density and poverty.

Comoros benefits from having low crime and no imminent threat of Islamist militancy. However, some radical Islamists (ideologically) known as djaulas harass Christians, particularly converts from Islam.

The Christian population in Comoros (0.5% of the total) is concentrated in the main cities, especially in the capital, Moroni, and in Mutsamudu, the main city on the island of Anjouan. The majority of Christians are Roman Catholic.

## How the situation varies by region

All Christian communities in Comoros face persecution, but persecution against converts from Islam is the most severe, regardless of where they live.

<sup>1</sup> Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

<sup>2</sup> Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

Christians in this group (e.g., the church of the Malagasy people from Madagascar) are restricted from integrating converts from Islam and preaching in public outside their church buildings, or else they face deportation. The pressure comes from radical Islamists, non-Christian religious leaders, and political leaders. Improvement may come with positive changes recently sought by the government, both domestically and for the purpose of building relationships with Western nations.

### Historical Christian communities

These do not exist separately from the expatriate category above.

### Converts to Christianity

Christians with a Muslim background face persecution at home from family and community members. They are shunned and completely cut off from their families and friends. Converts also experience persecution from government officials, political actors, non-Christian religious leaders, *djaulas* and other radical Islamist groups..

### Non-traditional Christian communities

Christians in this category, including Baptists and Evangelicals, face legal fines and imprisonment for their evangelism. The Penal Code declares that “whoever discloses, spreads, and teaches Muslims a religion other than Islam will be punished with imprisonment of three months to one year and a fine of 50,000 to 500,000 Comorian francs”.

## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Islamic oppression

Islamic oppression in Comoros is not new, but has worsened with the adoption of a constitutional change that declared Sunni Islam as the state religion. Parallel to the new Constitution, more Comorians are adopting a radical view of Islamism, especially on the islands of Anjouan and Moheli. In mosques and madrassas, some Muslim religious leaders regularly teach anti-Christian sentiments. *Djaulas*, an ultra-conservative group of radical scholars, many of whom are trained in Pakistan, are pushing the country to a more extreme view of Sharia law. The *djaulas* in particular harass, bully and ostracize Christians, particularly converts from Islam. As in many other Muslim-majority countries, it is unthinkable to leave Islam for the majority of Comorians. Those who do are discriminated against and harassed by family and community members. Christians are denied worshiping space, religious discussions in public and public preaching.

### Dictatorial paranoia

The government has consolidated power by promoting Sunni Islam at the expense of all other religions, placing serious restrictions on the activities of Christians and Christian NGOs. The government has openly stated that freedom of religion is not applicable to converts and Christians.



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## How are men and women differently affected?

### Women

Despite its matrilineal heritage, worship and social life in Comoros are dominated by Sunni principles, which place Christian women and girls at a societal disadvantage. Cases of domestic violence and the persecution of Christian women, particularly female converts from Islam, remain underreported due to poor legal and socio-economic protections. In addition to criminal prosecution, female converts may experience heightened abuse and discrimination. Comorian women and girls are also at high risk of transnational trafficking, owing to the country's weak border control.

#### Female typical pressure points:

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

### Men

While there are more similarities between the experiences of Christian men and women of Christian heritage, persecution targeting converts differs more according to gender. Male converts from Islam are vulnerable to societal pressures and especially risk being forced out of their homes or to divorce due to prevalent matrilineal norms. The absence of legal provisions against the discrimination of converts, plus the presence of extremist sympathizers, exacerbates the use of discriminatory workplace policies and the threat of physical violence, forcing some converts to flee the country in extreme cases.

#### Male typical pressure points:

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied food or water
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Forced divorce
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	45	66
2023	42	66
2022	53	63
2021	50	62
2020	54	57

*Comoros scored similar score during WWL 2023 and WWL 2024.*



# Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Girls and women who convert to the Christian faith may face house arrest.
- Only expatriate Christians are permitted to meet for worship, and then only at three registered churches in Moroni, Mutsamudu and Moheli.
- Preaching in public is not allowed for Christians. The Penal code says: “Whoever discloses, spreads, and teaches Muslims a religion other than Islam will be punished with imprisonment of three months to one year and a fine of 50,000 to 500,000 Comorian francs” (\$108-1,100).”

WWL Year	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians killed
2024	14	10*
2023	10*	10

*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

Although conversion is not officially outlawed, any Comorian nationals found to have converted from Islam are met with intense pressure from family and friends: ostracization, loss of livelihood and divorce. Converts would not be able to wear Christian symbols, such as the cross, without risk of violence. The government has openly encouraged violence against non-Sunni citizens. The law prohibits the public exercise of non-Sunni religious rituals on the basis of affronting society’s cohesion and endangering national unity. Public preaching of Christianity is a crime—and any mention or expression of the Christian faith can be interpreted as public preaching. Proselytizing, an illegal activity in Comoros, is punishable by law with a fine of 50,000 to 500,000 Comorian francs (\$110–\$1,100) and imprisonment of up to one year.

## Family life

The government has expressly stated that freedom of religion is not for the Comorian people. Christian ceremonies like weddings may be construed as preaching, an illegal activity that may attract a mob attack, so Christians keep a very low profile. For purposes of the government, all Comorians are Sunni Muslims and every child (even of converts) is presumed to be Muslim and registered as such. There is no room for parents to refuse to have their children sent to Islamic schools; it is mandatory.

## Community life

Openly practicing Christianity is prohibited and

society keeps a watchful eye on any non-Muslim groups, with converts from Islam being the most intensely marginalized, shunned, harassed, and threatened. They are seen as outcasts, unworthy of respect and protection. It is not uncommon for converts to be forced to recant their faith, so Christian converts hide their conversion.

## National life

Comoros is sliding backwards in freedom of religion. True to its Constitution, the government publicly exhorts citizens to reject all forms of religion except Sunni Islam. Families and communities who shun converts, be they Christians or Shia Muslims, get their cues from the national government. Christians struggle to find places for worship, as the government allows them to pray at only two designated places in the entire country: the expatriate churches in Moroni and Mutsamudu.

## Church life

Church activities remain under surveillance to ensure no Comorian national joins meetings. Christian activities outside of church buildings are seen as illegal proselytization. Communities of converts and non-traditional Christian communities do exist, but they cannot operate freely or officially. Existing expatriate churches are not allowed to open new branches, as this would be proof of their increasing numbers. No new church has been built or registered in the country for decades.

# International obligations & rights violated

Comoros has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under 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)

*\*Comoros has signed but not ratified the ICCPR and ICESCR.*

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

- Christian parents cannot raise their children according to their religious values (CRC Art. 14)
- Christian female converts run the risk of being forcibly married to Muslim men or forcibly divorced (CEDAW Art. 16)

## Situation of other religious minorities

In 2022 and 2023, Shia and Ahmadi Muslims reported that they were unable to worship publicly, and government authorities occasionally attended their religious gatherings in private homes to observe their practices without interference. The conservative nature of society and the government's stance on religion have contributed to these restrictions.



## Open Doors in Comoros

Open Doors has supported Christians on East African islands since the 1990s and our vision is to see a church mature in faith. We continue our support of the persecuted Church through:

- Discipleship
- Economic empowerment



### 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: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

*All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

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