

WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

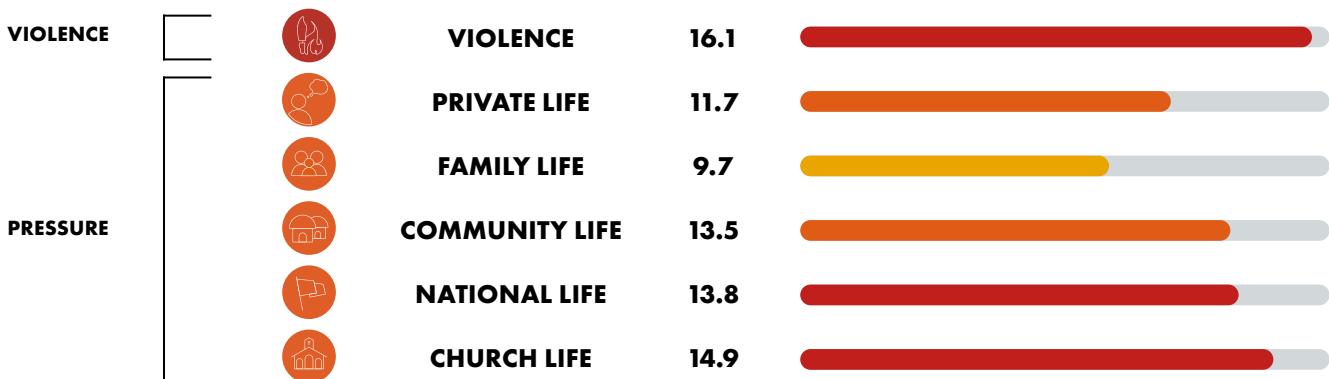
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
16

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 ($6 \times 16.7 = 100$).

Key findings

In Burkina Faso, the persecution of Christians is deeply tied to a broader collapse of state authority, escalating insecurity, and the rise of jihadist insurgencies. Armed groups such as Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) exploit the country's fragile political order—undermined by repeated military coups and retreating governance—to impose extremist ideologies and expand territorial control. In these ungoverned spaces, jihadists dominate illicit economies, including human trafficking, animal and mineral smuggling, and informal gold mining, which fund their operations. Religion is weaponized: churches are burned, Christian institutions are forced to close and converts—especially from Islam—are pressured or punished. The absence of legal protection has left Christian communities vulnerable to threats, displacement and violence. Climate stress and increasing poverty deepen grievances, enabling jihadists to offer services and parallel governance in neglected regions. Meanwhile, speeches that incite violence and discrimination by radical imams spread hatred, strengthen extremist beliefs, and encourage people to attack or persecute others. In this volatile context, being a Christian, particularly a convert, has become increasingly dangerous.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Ibrahim Traore

POPULATION

24,437,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

6,124,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	6,124,000	25.1
Muslims	13,958,000	57.1
Ethnic religionists	4,202,000	17.2
Others	153,000	0.6
Total		100%

Source²

Burkina Faso has long struggled with political instability, military rule, and deep poverty. The ousting of President Blaise Compaoré in 2014 after 27 years in power marked another turning point in the country's turbulent history. Nearly 80% of the population depends on subsistence farming, making the nation one of the world's least developed.

Geopolitical rivalries between Western powers and Russia are increasingly playing out in the region, worsening the existing crisis. Human rights conditions deteriorated sharply in 2022 and continued to decline through 2024, as reported by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the International Crisis Group. Jihadist insurgencies, organized crime, and corruption have deepened the crisis.

Brutal attacks by Islamist militant groups, including JNIM, ISWA, ISGS, AQIM, Boko Haram and others have caused mass civilian and military casualties. Nearly 2 million people, or 10% of the population, are now internally displaced.

Political upheaval has further destabilized the country. In January 2022, a military coup removed President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré and installed a transitional government, which was itself overthrown in October 2022 by Captain Ibrahim Traoré. In early 2024, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger withdrew from ECOWAS, accusing the bloc of foreign interference and failing to support their fight against terrorism. The three countries also exited the G5 Sahel and formed the "Alliance of Sahel States," a mutual defense pact.

Amid this chaos, extremist ideology has found a foothold in local religious spaces. In areas under jihadist control, radical imams have used mosque platforms to preach intolerance and incite violence against Christians. These sermons, couched in theological terms, legitimize persecution and exert pressure on Muslim-background converts.

As a result, Christians face growing persecution. Armed groups regularly attack churches, displace communities, and target Christians for their beliefs. Women and girls are especially vulnerable to abduction, rape, and forced marriage, while boys risk forced recruitment into armed groups. This targeted violence not only violates human rights but also erodes the institutional fabric of the Christian church in Burkina Faso, leaving it increasingly marginalized and exposed in a hostile and lawless environment.

¹ Gina A. Zurlo, ed., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

² Other refers to all the rest to make up 100%: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

How the situation varies by region

Christian persecution in Burkina Faso is highly regionalized. The north and east remain the most perilous, where state authority has collapsed and jihadist groups such as JNIM and ISGS operate freely, burning churches, killing clergy, and enforcing strict Islamic codes. Converts from Islam are at particular risk. In the west, ethno-religious tensions and clan structures underpin discrimination and social exclusion. Even outside militant zones, informal pressures make it difficult for Christians to worship or convert openly. Urban centers are comparatively safer but increasingly uneasy with the spread of extremist networks.

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

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

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

The Roman Catholic Church is the most dominant Christian denomination. Most of the country's political leaders have been Catholics. Catholics face fewer violations compared to other Christian groups, but Catholic churches have been targeted in the past.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

This category includes Christians of Muslim or traditional African religious backgrounds. 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 in major cities and are highly visible through open evangelism. Some observers argue that this visibility makes them easier targets.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

ISLAMIC OPPRESSION BLENDED WITH CLAN OPPRESSION

Islamist extremism in Burkina Faso is increasingly entangled with local clan structures and communal grievances. Groups like Ansar ul Islam, founded in 2016, and JNIM exploit underdevelopment, marginalization, and anti-Western sentiment, especially hostility toward France, to advance their ideological agendas. These groups indoctrinate youth, enforce strict religious codes, and justify violence against Christians as divinely mandated. In some areas, traditional clans support or tolerate jihadist activity due to ethnic ties, political alliances, or fear. Radical imams further legitimize persecution by preaching intolerance in mosques. The result is widespread violence against Christians, including attacks on churches and pressure on converts. State counterterrorism responses, often indiscriminate, fuel further instability and mistrust, leaving Christian communities deeply exposed.

ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

Weak governance and systemic corruption have empowered jihadists to infiltrate local economies, trafficking weapons, minerals, and people. Bribery and collusion among officials, security forces, and business networks shield militants from accountability. Christians are frequently extorted, abducted, or targeted for economic gain, while churches are raided or taxed. In such lawless zones, Christian communities face unchecked persecution under militant-imposed norms.

DICTIONARIAL PARANOIA

Military regimes in Burkina Faso often conflate religious independence with political threat. Christian leaders critical of violence or government failures risk being labeled as subversive. Emergency laws and surveillance are used to raid churches and disrupt Christian NGOs. In minority regions, gatherings are viewed as political dissent. The regime's obsession with control erodes trust, shrinks civil space, and exposes Christians, especially converts and outspoken leaders, to repression disguised as national security.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Christian women and girls in Burkina Faso face severe persecution, including rape, forced marriage, abduction and family rejection. Islamist influence is strong in the Sahel and eastern regions, where jihadist groups carry out raids that abduct women, often forcing them into marriage or sexual slavery. Sexual violence is a common tactic used to terrorize Christian communities, with daughters of church leaders often targeted for rape to intensify community suffering. Female converts from Islam or traditional religions endure additional risks, including house arrest, forced marriage, death threats and denial of inheritance.

Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied access to Christian religious materials, teaching and rites
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied communal resources
- Denied custody of children
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Targeted seduction

Trafficking

- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Burkina Faso's protracted conflict has displaced millions, with armed groups now controlling vast areas. Christian men and boys are particularly vulnerable: they are abducted, recruited, or killed by jihadist groups, instilling fear and destabilizing families reliant on male providers. Church leaders, often male, face abduction or execution, sometimes in front of their families. Such attacks, including the 2024 massacre of parishioners in Essakane-Village, traumatize communities and drive displacement. Many men and boys flee the country, leaving their families impoverished and Christian communities weakened.

Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Enforced religious dress code
- 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
2026	16	80
2025	20	76
2024	20	75
2023	23	71
2022	32	68

Burkina Faso registered a four-point increase compared to its WWL 2025 score. The rise is largely driven by higher national life, which moved from 11.5 to 13.8, and a modest uptick in the church-life score from 14.0 to 14.9—reflecting persecution of Christians being embedded within the country’s political-legal environment, influencing how churches operate and how the Christian community maintains its place in national life. The violence score also rose slightly, from 15.5 to 16.1. These changes are driven by two reinforcing forces: the continued rise of armed Islamist militants and the growing pressure generated by an increasing impact of dictatorial paranoia.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- January 2025:** Six Christians were killed during coordinated and targeted village raids by Islamist militant groups in Banwa Province.
- 20 May 2025:** Two Christians were executed by Islamist militant groups when they attacked a church in Fada N’Gourma area.
- Churches and church properties attacked:** On 6 October 2024, JNIM militants attacked a Catholic church in Manni (Gnagna Province) during coordinated assaults across the town. The church was among several sites targeted, and multiple civilians were killed and wounded in the violence.
- Mass displacement of Christians caused by Islamist militant violence:** According to local researchers, violent attacks by militant Islamists have driven thousands of Christians from their homes, forcing entire church congregations to abandon villages and seek refuge in safer towns and displacement camps.



WWL Year	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians internally displaced
2026	10*	150	100*	10,000*
2025	100*	201	100*	10,000*

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period – for full results see the violence section of the country’s corresponding WWL Persecution Dynamics. 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. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*.

PRIVATE LIFE

In Burkina Faso, the private religious lives of Christians—particularly converts from Islam or traditional religions—are increasingly constrained. Converts risk rejection, threats, and expulsion from their families and communities. Although conversion is not outlawed, it has become widely condemned. Burkina Faso used to be known as a country of great social cohesion with many families consisting of Muslims and Christians. In regions under jihadist influence, Christians fear keeping Bibles or religious symbols in their homes, as militants may raid residences searching for evidence of non-Islamic belief. Even small gatherings for prayer or informal faith-sharing can lead to denunciation. Converts often live in isolation, deprived of familial ties, and pressured to return to Islam under threat of harm or loss of livelihood.

FAMILY LIFE

Christian families face systemic pressure, especially where Islamic dominance is strong. In some public or Islamic-run schools, Christian children are coerced into attending Muslim religious instruction. Across cities like Bobo Dioulasso and Ouagadougou, there are documented cases of students being marginalized for refusing to participate. In jihadist-controlled areas, teachers have been executed for resisting Islamic mandates. Converts frequently lose inheritance rights and may be subjected to forced marriage or house arrest. Public Christian ceremonies like baptisms or weddings are avoided or held discreetly, as open celebration can provoke violent retaliation or militant targeting.

COMMUNITY LIFE

In northern areas, such as the Soum Province, Christian communities face systematic exclusion and violence. Jihadist groups such as Ansar al-Islam enforce rigid religious codes and target Christians for abduction, forced conversion, or execution. Converts face particular hostility as they are denied access to communal resources and shunned socially. Armed attacks on schools, churches, and aid centers have caused mass displacement, leading to the collapse of Christian communal life in several regions.

NATIONAL LIFE

Christians face growing difficulties interacting with state institutions. Churches often encounter bureaucratic resistance when applying for land or construction permits. In areas under jihadist influence, government protection is minimal or absent. Christian leaders who advocate for justice or speak against religious discrimination risk surveillance, accusations of disloyalty, or retaliation. These threats discourage participation in civil society, public forums, or national discourse.

CHURCH LIFE

Though Burkina Faso is officially secular, churches in militant-controlled areas operate under constant scrutiny. Religious gatherings are monitored, youth programs curtailed, and evangelism discouraged. Bible distribution, while legal, is dangerous for converts. Under military rule, sermons are censored—both censorship by the government and self-censorship—and politically vocal pastors face arrest or harassment, narrowing the church's public role and influence.



International obligations & rights violated

Burkina Faso has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under 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)

Situation of other religious minorities

Islamist radicalization is accelerating in Burkina Faso, especially in the peripheral regions where jihadist groups dominate. Radical Sunni teachings have displaced more moderate forms like Sufism, placing even Sufi Muslims under threat. Religious diversity is disappearing, and teachers are pressured to conduct Quranic instruction or face consequences. Simultaneously, rising anti-Islamic sentiment among vigilante groups is fueling intercommunal tensions, creating a hostile environment for all religious minorities.



Open Doors in Burkina Faso

Open Doors' support to the Church in Burkina Faso began in 2019 as jihadist violence increased radically. Our vision is to see the Church increasingly respond biblically to persecution by spiritually empowering its members and caring for the most affected.



ABOUT THIS DOSSIER

- The content of this Country Dossier is based on detailed analysis carried out by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. This dossier may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2026 Open Doors International.
- All 50 Country Dossiers – along with the latest update of WWL Methodology – can be accessed [here](#).
- The WWL 2026 reporting period was 01 October 2024 - 30 September 2025.