

WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

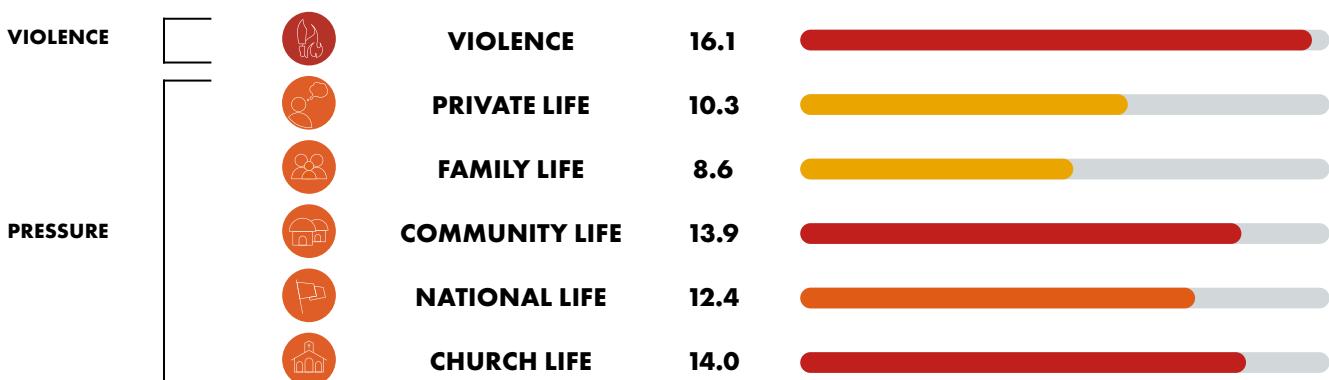
CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

22

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.



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

The already fragile situation in the Central African Republic (CAR) continues to worsen, with conflict in neighboring Sudan adding external pressure. Escalating violence in Sudan risks spilling into CAR, intensifying insecurity for vulnerable populations—especially Christians. Internally, the collapse of state authority has fostered widespread lawlessness. Armed groups, corrupt officials, and jihadist elements exploit this vacuum, often targeting Christians. Churches have been looted or destroyed, and outspoken Christian leaders face threats, detention, or assassination. Women and youth are particularly exposed to exploitation and abuse. Religious and ethnic violence by armed factions has forced thousands of Christians into displacement. Many live in overcrowded camps with little security or aid. In northern and remote regions, Muslim-background converts to Christianity face physical assault, forced isolation, and rejection by their families. These abuses go largely unpunished, reinforcing fear and helplessness. In CAR, Christian communities increasingly find themselves without protection—trapped between state failure and militant hostility.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Faustin-Archange Touadera

POPULATION

6,097,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

4,470,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



Context

| Religious context | Number of adherents | % of adherents in country |
|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| Christians | 4,470,000 | 73.3 |
| Muslims | 929,000 | 15.2 |
| Ethnic religionists | 640,000 | 10.5 |
| Others | 58,000 | 1.0 |
| | Total | 100% |

Source²

Since gaining independence in 1960, the Central African Republic (CAR) has been plagued by violence fueled by intersecting tensions between armed groups, ethnic and religious factions, and herder-farmer communities. A turning point came in 2013, when the predominantly Muslim Séléka coalition seized power, triggering sectarian conflict and retaliation from self-defense groups, notably the anti-Balaka. Though often labeled Christian, anti-Balaka fighters largely follow African Traditional Religions and have been condemned by church leaders. President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, elected in 2016, prioritized national reconciliation, culminating in the 2019 Political Peace Agreement signed by 14 armed groups. However, the accord collapsed ahead of the 2020 elections, and violence resumed. Outside the capital, Bangui, the government exercises little control, with most of the country divided among armed factions. This fragmentation complicates monitoring religious persecution and governance.

The president's 2023 constitutional proposal, removing presidential term limits, has sparked political unrest

and fears of growing authoritarianism. Civil society groups and opposition parties have faced crackdowns. Meanwhile, external actors including Rwanda, the Wagner Group, replaced or/and rebranded as Africa Corps (a Russian paramilitary force), and the Chadian military increased their presence. Some rebel factions are now aligned with foreign agendas, including calls for an Islamic state, further destabilizing the situation. Christians in CAR navigate a treacherous landscape. Though the 2016 Constitution guarantees religious freedom and Christian-Muslim relations are generally peaceful, Christians face violence from both ex-Séléka fighters and anti-Balaka groups. Converts from Islam, often face social exclusion or violence. In Muslim-majority areas, attacks on churches and Christian symbols have been reported.

By 2025, continued clashes between government forces and rebel groups resulted in casualties and widespread displacement. There are increasing reports of Sudanese-backed rebel involvement, adding regional dimensions to the conflict. CAR now finds itself surrounded by unstable neighbors, making its internal crises more complex. Christians—especially converts and those in contested areas—remain at heightened risk, caught between political chaos, militant violence, and a deteriorating humanitarian landscape. On July 26 2025, [President Faustin-Archange Touadéra officially declared his candidacy for a third term](#) in the upcoming December 2025 presidential election, following a constitutional referendum in 2023 that eliminated term limits. The announcement underscores growing concerns about the consolidation of power and the implications for democratic governance in CAR.

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

Rights violations against Christians are most severe in the northern and eastern regions of the Central African Republic, where armed groups hostile to Christianity exert significant control. In several cases, villages with known Christian populations have been targeted and looted. The eastern border regions near Sudan are particularly volatile due to cross-border infiltration by jihadist elements, increasing the threat to Christian communities. The absence of state security, combined with ethnic and religious tensions, creates an environment where Christians are vulnerable to ongoing persecution, with little recourse to justice or protection.

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 largest denomination, operating many churches, schools, and clinics. During and after the Séléka coup, many Catholic facilities were looted. Known for advocating peace and sheltering civilians, both Muslim and Christian, the Church has often been targeted for attack as a result.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Converts from Islam face strong family and societal pressure to renounce their faith. They rarely worship in public due to fear of violent retaliation, especially in Muslim-majority northern regions.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Evangelical and Pentecostal groups have suffered attacks from ex-Séléka militants. Despite the risks, these communities are growing rapidly, attracting many new adherents in recent years.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

ISLAMIC OPPRESSION

Islamic oppression in the Central African Republic is most visible in Muslim-majority regions, where Christians, particularly those who have converted from Islam, face entrenched hostility. Converts are pressured to renounce their faith through threats, harassment, or physical violence, often from their own families and communities. Public expressions of Christianity, such as attending church or possessing a Bible, are heavily discouraged and can provoke retaliation. In these areas, Christian converts are treated as traitors to their community or family identity. As a result, many are forced to live out their faith in secrecy, fearing exposure and persecution.

ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

Criminal networks and systemic corruption contribute significantly to the persecution of Christians. Armed groups acting as criminal enterprises routinely loot churches, extort congregations, and threaten pastors. In urban areas like Bangui, both registered and informal churches are pressured to pay protection fees or risk violence. Despite claims by some groups to defend religious interests, their actions reveal opportunistic motives. Impunity is widespread, and Christians are frequently among the most vulnerable to abuse.

ETHNO-RELIGIOUS HOSTILITY BLENDED WITH CLAN OPPRESSION

Persecution also arises from the intersection of ethnic identity, traditional beliefs, and inter-clan rivalry. In some areas, Christians who resist ancestral religious practices face social exclusion or retaliation. Ethnic minorities, such as the Ba'aka Pygmies, face forced labor, and Christian individuals from weaker clans are at risk of being coerced into armed groups. These overlapping dynamics deepen marginalization and heighten vulnerability, making faith-based persecution inseparable from broader structures of ethnic and cultural oppression.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Years of conflict have left Christian women and girls in CAR highly vulnerable to rape, abduction, trafficking, and forced marriage, often used by rebel groups as a weapon of war to terrorize communities. Survivors face stigma, trauma, and sometimes pregnancy, leading many families to marry off daughters for “protection.” Girls risk being abducted en route to school, discouraging education. Converts may face house arrest, forced marriage, or separation from their children. In IDP camps, Christian women remain exposed to exploitation and abuse.

Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Forced to flee town/country
- Trafficking
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Christian men and boys in CAR are often executed, abducted, or forced into rebel groups. Many are used as slave labor in gold and diamond mines, with Wagner mercenaries implicated in killings and abductions. Pastors are especially targeted - falsely accused of espionage, attacked during services, kidnapped, or killed. Markets are dominated by Islamic leaders who overtax or loot Christian-owned shops, driving families into poverty. Discrimination continues in the national military, where Christians are marginalized. Violence, forced recruitment, and economic oppression leave families devastated.

Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- 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 | 22 | 75 |
| 2025 | 27 | 72 |
| 2024 | 28 | 70 |
| 2023 | 24 | 70 |
| 2022 | 31 | 68 |

CAR's score increased by 3 points, driven mainly by the sharp rise in the national-sphere score from 9.583 to 12.431. The increase reflects the consolidation of power by actors influencing key regions, including elements within the national government. Christians face national-level pressure largely because the state cannot protect them: armed groups control vast areas, restrict movement, extort travelers, and treat outspoken Christian leaders as political opponents. Cases of abuse rarely move through national institutions, and reconstruction resources reach communities unevenly, intensifying the pressure.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Targeting of churches and Christian property:** Armed groups increasingly target churches and Christian property, leading to the destruction of religious buildings and the looting of Christian-owned assets. This pattern of violence has severely disrupted the lives of many Christian communities, causing widespread fear and displacement.
- Attacks on women and girls:** In areas controlled by jihadist groups, women and girls face heightened risks of violence, including abductions, forced marriages and sexual exploitation. The presence of these armed groups has created an environment of extreme insecurity, particularly for female members of the Christian community.
- Forced displacement of Christians:** Due to ongoing violence and threats from armed groups, many Christians have been forced to flee their homes. This displacement has resulted in a significant humanitarian crisis, as displaced individuals and families struggle to find safety and basic necessities amidst the chaos.



| WWL Year | Christians abducted | Christians killed | Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed | Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted |
|----------|---------------------|-------------------|--|--|
| 2026 | 100* | 100* | 100* | 100* |
| 2025 | 100* | 67 | 100* | 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 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

Converts to Christianity from Islam in the Central African Republic face severe risks, particularly within their own households and extended families. Once their new faith becomes known, they may be disowned, cut off from financial support, or subjected to intense psychological and emotional pressure to reconvert. In the Muslim-majority northern regions, where armed groups exert territorial and ideological control, even possessing Christian materials—such as a Bible or religious pamphlet—can be life-threatening. Reports indicate that individuals have been beaten or killed on the spot for engaging in Christian worship, carrying religious symbols, or attending church meetings. Many converts are forced to practice their faith in secret, avoiding even small prayer gatherings for fear of exposure.

FAMILY LIFE

Christian converts often face the breakdown of family ties. When one spouse converts, pressure is placed on the other to seek divorce—especially when the converting partner is a woman. Inheritance rights are frequently stripped, severing economic survival. In areas dominated by armed groups, children of Christian families—especially orphans or those whose parents have fled—are extremely vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking, or forced conscription. Girls face a heightened risk of forced marriage to older men affiliated with militant groups, particularly in lawless regions.

COMMUNITY LIFE

In Muslim-majority areas where the government has lost control, armed groups have filled the power vacuum, enforcing informal Sharia-inspired codes. Christians in these areas face persistent discrimination and social isolation. Converts are often excluded from accessing basic services, including healthcare, food aid or educational opportunities. Armed groups and their supporters monitor Christian households, making it dangerous to host gatherings or speak openly about their faith. Young girls and women are especially at risk of abduction and sexual violence.

NATIONAL LIFE

Freedom for Christians to move across regions is restricted due to roadblocks and checkpoints controlled by militias. Pastors traveling between congregations face kidnapping or murder. Armed groups act as de facto authorities in many areas, displacing thousands of Christians. These groups use intimidation, extortion, and targeted violence to suppress Christian presence.

CHURCH LIFE

Though the state does not officially monitor churches, armed groups frequently disrupt Christian worship. Services have been raided, buildings burned, and pastors have been attacked. In remote areas, the climate of fear prevents open religious expression. The risk of violence has pushed many congregations underground or into exile.



International obligations & rights violated

Central African Republic 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](#))

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

- Christian converts in Muslim-majority areas experience pressure and violence from their family and community to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians are physically attacked for sharing their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians are killed because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 6.1)
- Christian women and girls are raped and sexually abused because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 7)
- Christian female converts run the risk of being abducted and forcibly married to Muslim men (ICCPR Art. 23; CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art. 10)

Situation of other religious minorities

While Christians face widespread persecution in CAR, Muslim minorities have also been targeted. According to the U.S. State Department, government forces and Wagner Group operatives have arbitrarily detained and mistreated Muslims, including Imams and Fulani pastoralists. In response, local Muslim communities have staged protests. Though not the primary targets of the conflict, small religious minorities face localized hostility and insecurity in areas where tensions remain high.



Open Doors in Central African Republic

Open Doors, through local partners and churches, has been involved in CAR for quite a few years. From 2013, our programs were dominated by support to the Church in crisis following the March 2013 coup by the Islamist extremist Séléka forces. Since then, the realities on the ground have morphed once again as former enemy forces merged in efforts to expand their foothold over territories rich in natural resources. The Church remains in a very precarious situation. Amid these realities, our vision is a persecuted Church that is holistically resilient and capable of responding to the needs of its members in a sustainable manner. Programs include:

- Persecution preparedness and integration of cross-cultural converts
- Youth empowerment through socio-economic opportunities, literacy and discipleship
- Psychosocial support and justice projects



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.

A few of the photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.