

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

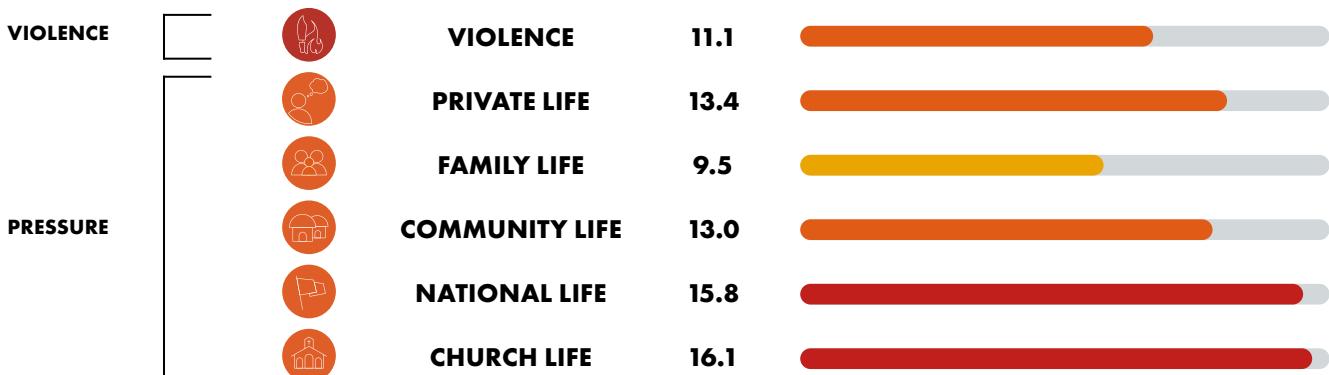
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**17**

## 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 ( $6 \times 16.7 = 100$ ).

### Key findings

Religion is viewed as a threat by the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The CCP has banned its members, youth affiliates and dependents (numbering at 281 million) from participating in spiritual activities and enforces 'Sinicization' of churches—aligning religious doctrine with Communist ideology and Chinese culture. State-sanctioned church associations (TSPM for Protestants and CPA for Catholics) are the only legal religious organizations, with non-registered "house churches" considered illegal despite sometimes having hundreds of members and a decades-old history.

The government incentivizes citizens to report illegal religious activities, putting church leaders under increasing pressure to organize their ministry in covert ways. Approved churches face pressure to align with Communist doctrine. Regulations implemented since 2018 governing internet usage, social media, NGOs, and religious venues are being strictly enforced, severely limiting religious freedom.

Christians face raids, church closures, leader arrests, and confiscation of materials. The latest restriction further curbs the religious online activities of clergies. ([Bitter Winter, 18 September 2025](#))

Converts from Islam or Tibetan Buddhism who are discovered by family or community members typically face threats and physical harm.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Xi Jinping

### POPULATION

1,424,382,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

96,700,000 (Open Doors estimate)

### MAIN RELIGION

Agnostic/Atheist

### GOVERNMENT

Communist Party-led state



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## Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	96,700,000	6.8
Agnostics/Atheists	558,524,000	39.2
Buddhists	232,371,000	16.3
Others	537,000,000	37.7
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source<sup>1</sup>

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) maintains power through tight societal control, using Maoist rhetoric and Xi Jinping's ideology, which was incorporated into the CCP Constitution in 2017. Xi has systematically dismantled limitations on leadership power established under Deng Xiaoping ([PRC Leader, 1 March 2025](#)). Universities teach Xi's ideology and the Party tests members via a dedicated app, with these concepts taught to citizens starting in kindergarten. Alternative views result in the purge or sidelining of members, and Christian faith prohibits public service careers.

The CCP has consolidated control over education by merging university presidents' offices with Party Committees, creating unified Party leadership over higher education ([Radio Free Asia, 18 January 2024](#)). China's Constitution declares the country atheist, with books like "The Principles of Scientific Atheism" distributed as textbooks in educational institutions and to Party cadres. The government promotes Confucianism as the only "truly Chinese" philosophy compatible with Communist ideology.

The Three-Self Patriotic Movement (government sanctioned umbrella organization for Protestant Christianity in China) and the Patriotic Catholic Association are the only officially recognized Christian organizations. Independent house churches, though more numerous, often operate with minimal pastoral leadership after being forced to split into smaller groups, meeting in changing locations. Most follow Pentecostal practices ([China Source, 13 June 2023](#)). Simultaneously, many TSPM church venues are being forced to consolidate.

Catholics represent a minority of China's Christian population, concentrated mainly in Hebei province

<sup>1</sup> Other refers to all the rest to make up 100%: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025 – adapted to incorporate OD-estimate

and northern/central regions. Beyond the CPA, independent Catholic churches maintain allegiance to Rome. The Vatican extended its agreement with the Chinese government concerning the appointment of bishops in 2024 for another four years, despite all criticism. Communist authorities appointed two new bishops in the time of “sede vacante” in the Vatican in April/May 2025, without consultation with the Holy See. ([China Source, 27 May 2025](#)).

Comprehensive regulations govern online religious activities, physical venues, and leadership selection. Bible apps are banned from app stores, and unregistered church pastors increasingly face accusations of economic crimes and fraud for collecting offerings, or “picking quarrels and provoking trouble.” Recent regulations show how the Communist Party is increasingly seeking to control Christian practice and teaching.

China faces numerous domestic and international challenges, including balancing its Russia-Ukraine war stance, US-China relations under the Trump administration, economic difficulties, and demographic challenges, leading to a more cautious national outlook ([Merics, 5 March 2025](#)).

## How the situation varies by region

Converts from Muslim or Buddhist minority ethnic groups face the harshest violations of religious freedom in China, often driven by both state and family pressures. Consequently, the hotspots are Xinjiang, Tibet, Sichuan, Yunnan, Qinghai and Ningxia (where Muslim minorities like the Hui can be mostly found). Guizhou and Yunnan are also home to many ethnic minorities. Protestant Christians are more concentrated in the provinces of Henan, Zhejiang, Anhui and Jiangxi. There are high numbers of Catholic Christians in Hebei, however, Christians and Christian churches face increasing restrictions and monitoring countrywide, and reports are coming from almost all provinces.



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## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### COMMUNIST AND POST-COMMUNIST OPPRESSION

Christians constitute China's largest social group not fully under state control, making them a perceived threat to Communist Party authority. Party regulations explicitly state that members who maintain religious beliefs despite “strengthened thought education” will be “encouraged to leave the Party” ([Reuters, 27 August 2018](#)). This policy represents a systematic approach to eliminating religious influence within the Party's ranks.

Since 2021, the CCP has intensified ideological indoctrination through mandatory study sessions of Xi Jinping Thought for all citizens, with particular emphasis on party members and public sector employees. The “Patriotic Education Law” implemented in January 2024 extends this ideological control to all educational institutions and religious organizations. Communist ideology is reinforced through all available channels, with increasingly strict supervision of adherence. In ethnic minority regions, the Party strategically co-opts Muslim and Tibetan leaders as Party officials, tasking them with restricting Christian activities in their communities, effectively weaponizing ethnic and religious divisions to maintain control.

### DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

President Xi Jinping has consolidated power to a degree unprecedented since Mao Zedong, eliminating term limits and elevating his personal ideology to constitutional status. Under Xi's leadership, the CCP has adopted increasingly militant approaches to maintaining control, informed by extensive studies of factors that led to communism's collapse elsewhere. Christian communities are specifically targeted as potential threats due to their perceived foreign connections and alternative value systems. The Party systematically pressures officials to implement anti-Christian policies through a combination of incentives for compliance and severe penalties for those who fail to enforce restrictions, creating a pervasive climate of surveillance and control.

## Who is affected?

### COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

They are relatively freer than local Christians but face monitoring and restricted contact with Chinese churches, especially with the new 2025 Regulations as mentioned above. Numbers have declined sharply, especially Westerners, as authorities target foreign missionaries from South Korea, America, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

### HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Government-controlled TSPM and CPA churches operate under state influence, with leaders carefully self-censoring. Both organizations have published five-year “Sinicization” plans ([China Source, 3 April 2024](#)).

### CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Muslim and Tibetan Buddhist converts face dual pressure from government restrictions and community rejection. Tibetan Buddhists face strong pressure from the government, especially under the new Ethnic Unity Law, forcing Tibetans to assimilate to the Han majority and CCP ideology. Family and friends additionally pressure them to return to traditional faiths.

### NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

House churches have abandoned large public gatherings in commercial spaces for small private home meetings of 10-20 people, severely impacted by intensifying control and mandatory “Sinicization.”



## How are men and women differently affected?

### WOMEN

Christian women in China face surveillance, harassment, threats and imprisonment, especially as some lead house churches. Converts from Muslim or Buddhist backgrounds can be pressured into divorce and ostracized as traitors to their ethnic group. Female believers are especially vulnerable to sexual violence, trafficking and forced marriage, with China's gender imbalance fueling bride trafficking from neighboring countries, including Vietnam, Myanmar and North Korea. Female defectors and migrants are at high risk of exploitation. Rising state pressure on women to conform to "traditional" roles further compounds their vulnerability.

#### Female typical pressure points:

- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Trafficking
- Violence – sexual

### MEN

Christian men in China endure surveillance, harassment, imprisonment and physical abuse, with police beatings commonly reported. As most church leaders are men, they are prime targets: pastors, Catholic priests and high-profile house church leaders face detention, interrogation or abduction, intended to intimidate entire congregations. Men held in prolonged detention experience severe trauma, while their families suffer financially and emotionally from the loss of a provider. Under such pressure, some leaders choose to emigrate, leaving congregations vulnerable and creating leadership gaps in Christian communities.

#### Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Imprisonment by government

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	17	79
2025	15	78
2024	19	78
2023	16	77
2022	17	76

After an increase of 0.3 points in WWL 2025 (after increases of 0.4 points in WWL 2024, 1.1 points in WWL 2023, of 1.7 points in WWL 2022, more than four points in WWL 2021, five points in WWL 2020 and seven points in WWL 2019), the score for China in WWL 2026 increased by one point, mainly due to new regulations (adding to a string of rules from 2018 onwards), which are being implemented in a strict and uniform manner. This led to a higher score in National Life. It is getting increasingly difficult to avoid having to fall in line with official Communist ideology, especially with the continued flurry of published guidelines and policies affecting churches. Reports are emerging concerning the effects of ideological education and the history and doctrine of the Communist Party of China (CCP) on state-approved churches in particular. The violence score remained at the same level as in WWL 2025. Churches continued to gather in smaller groups or even moved completely online, but the introduction of further limitations makes this option more challenging. All regulations on religion are putting high pressure on churches, no matter whether they are government-affiliated or not. The latest regulations concern online activities of foreigners as well as private online activities of clergy, especially on social media. More legal restrictions have been announced and will enter into force in 2026. A number of house church raids and arrests of church leaders happened after the end of the reporting period and are not reflected in the WWL 2026 score, yet.

## Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **10 April 2025:** Lay Christian Wang Honglan was sentenced to four years and 10 months in prison and a fine of one million Yuan by a court in Hohhot, Province Nei Mongol for selling legally published bibles for discounted prices, as well as for printing and distributing gospel booklets. Eight other Christians received sentences and fines as well. They were accused of “illegal business operations” and portrayed as an “organized criminal group” ([China Aid, 15 August 2025](#)).
- **June 2025:** At the beginning of June 2025, multiple venues of Beijing Zion church were raided by police, including in Sichuan and Zhejiang. Church members, clergy and staff have been summoned and detained. ([China Aid, 4 June 2025](#)).
- **20 June 2025:** Nine church leaders and members of Golden Lampstand church in Linfen City, Shanxi province were found guilty of “fraud” and sentenced from one year and ten months with a fine of 3000 RMB up to nine years and two months with a fine of 100,000 RMB ([Bitter Winter, 23 June 2025](#)). An appeal against this verdict was rejected on 15 August 2025 by the Linfen Intermediate People’s Court ([Bitter Winter, 25 August 2025](#)).

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians' private property damaged or confiscated
2026	0	1,000*	100*	10*
2025	0	1,000*	100*	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 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

Online access to Christian content faces strict restrictions, with Bible apps and audiobooks frequently removed. A deliberate effort aims to block the digital distribution of Christian materials. The beginning implementation of a centralized virtual ID in 2025 further tightens website and social media access control ([CNN, 20 June 2025](#)). Authorities conduct home searches targeting Christians. Converts from other faiths must conceal their beliefs to avoid threats and detention. Party members and military personnel face severe consequences for conversion. Hundreds of Christians annually endure detention, including harsh “residential surveillance in designated location”, holding them incommunicado.

## FAMILY LIFE

Children under 18 are prohibited from all religious activities, with parents warned that such participation constitutes illegal behavior. Students face pressure to reveal their parents’ religious beliefs, while Young Pioneers and Communist Youth League organizations actively recruit in schools, pressuring Christian students to demonstrate Party loyalty. Children of converts particularly face threats of academic penalties, including graduation denial or rejection from higher education. Education Ministry directives explicitly prohibit all religious activities in educational institutions, creating difficult situations for Christian families attempting to pass on their faith.

## COMMUNITY LIFE

Surveillance through CCTV, neighborhood committees, and security guards is pervasive. Active local church leaders can face constant monitoring and police interrogation, with the CCP operating a reward system encouraging reporting of religious activities. The grid management system enables comprehensive neighborhood monitoring. Employment discrimination affects Christians particularly in public sector positions requiring Party membership. Christian converts from other religions face intense family and community pressure to renounce Christianity, including forced participation in non-Christian religious ceremonies or ancestor worship rituals.

## NATIONAL LIFE

China’s constitution nominally protects religious freedom, but the state dictates what constitutes “normal” religious activity. Cases against Christians increasingly use charges like “illegal business operations” or “fraud” to mask religious persecution. Authorities employ tactics including permit denials, financial investigations, and church closures under false pretenses. “Border control lists” restrict travel for some leaders, and returning travelers may face accusations of illegal border crossings based on overseas religious

activities. State-approved pastors must promote “Core Socialist Values” and “Patriotism”. Regulations mandate sermons reflecting these values. Christians reliant on government subsidies sometimes face pressure to compromise their faith for financial support.

## CHURCH LIFE

Church activities are heavily monitored through agents and CCTV, with state-approved sermons often requiring pre-approval. Regulations mandate ideological training emphasizing Xi Jinping Thought, forcing clergy to demonstrate loyalty to the CCP. Since 2024, mandatory “patriotic education” and “red tours” reinforce political alignment. According to new rules on “Online behavior of religious clergy”, published 15 September 2025, clergy not only has to “support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, uphold the socialist system” and “core socialist values”, they may also not say anything religious on unofficial channels like their private social media ([Bitter Winter, 18 September 2025](#)). Unregistered churches face increased harassment, fragmenting into mobile groups to evade authorities, particularly in major cities. State-sanctioned churches are often merged into larger entities for easier control. A country expert notes the complete absence of channels to voice concerns about religious policies. Local authorities now have zero tolerance for dissent within religious communities ([Bitter Winter, 18 September 2025](#)).



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## International obligations & rights violated

**China 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](#))

*\*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

Muslim, Buddhist, Taoist, Jewish, and Christian worship sites face closure campaigns. Muslims, Buddhists, and Falun Gong adherents report discrimination in jobs, housing, and business, while Tibetan Buddhists face intensified pressure under the Ethnic Unity Law, especially in 2025 during the Dalai Lama's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Around one million Muslims in Xinjiang are detained in "re-education" camps, which China claims fight extremism. Though first denied, their existence was later confirmed by leaked documents and satellite evidence.



## Open Doors in China

Open Doors supports persecuted Christians in China through partnerships with local churches and individuals. Our ministry focuses on the following key areas:

1. Biblical and discipleship training – we provide foundational biblical and discipleship training to the most persecuted Chinese Christians, categorized into three groups:
  - Muslim Background Believers – primarily from Islamic ethnic minorities in northwest China
  - Buddhist Background Believers – from minority ethnic groups
  - Mainstream Han Chinese Believers
2. Support for the most persecuted:
  - Muslim and Buddhist background believers face the harshest persecution
  - Where possible, we distribute contextualized Christian literature (mostly digital) to all three groups
  - We offer persecution preparedness training and small group discipleship, especially as religious restrictions continue to tighten, and churches shift to house church models
  - Converts from Muslim or Buddhist backgrounds often face severe consequences for their faith. Open Doors works through Han missionaries and indigenous leaders to deliver training and practical support to strengthen the wider body of believers and promote God-centered and sustainable church growth even amidst persecution
3. Mobilizing the Han (mainstream) Chinese Church:
  - We encourage Han Chinese churches to actively support Muslim and Buddhist background believers
4. Equipping the next generation:
  - Children and youth under 18 need intentional discipleship, as Chinese regulations prohibit their affiliation in any religion or their participation in any religious activities



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## 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.

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