

WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

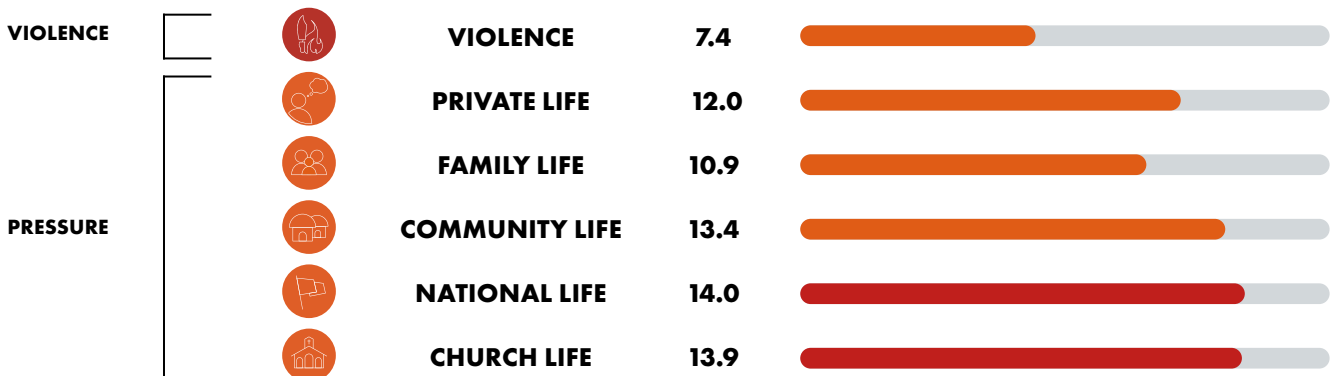
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

LAOS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
28



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

The killing of pastor Sy in 2022 and Pastor Thongkham in 2024, alongside a spike in violent incidents in 2024, created a climate of fear among Christians. One leader shared “There are ongoing efforts to intimidate and threaten Christian leaders...they are being told to cease their religious activities and abandon their faith, with explicit warnings that if they do not comply, they might face a similar fate as Pastor Thongkham.” In rural areas, traditional practices often supersede national laws. Christians face violence from communities, village leaders, and families. Converts endure the severest violations, considered to bring disunity and spiritual risk to Buddhist-animist communities, often leading to village expulsion. The government recognizes three churches: the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC), Catholic Church, and Seventh-day Adventist Church. Other Christian groups must operate unofficially. Even within the approved LEC, an estimated 75% of congregations lack permanent buildings, conducting worship in homes. Since gatherings require reporting to authorities, house churches operate secretly as “illegal gatherings”.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Thongloun Sisoulith

POPULATION

7,838,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

219,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Buddhism

GOVERNMENT

Communist Party-led state



Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	219,000	2.8
Buddhists	4,222,000	53.9
Ethnic religionists	3,226,000	41.2
Others	171,000	2.1
	Total	100%

Source²

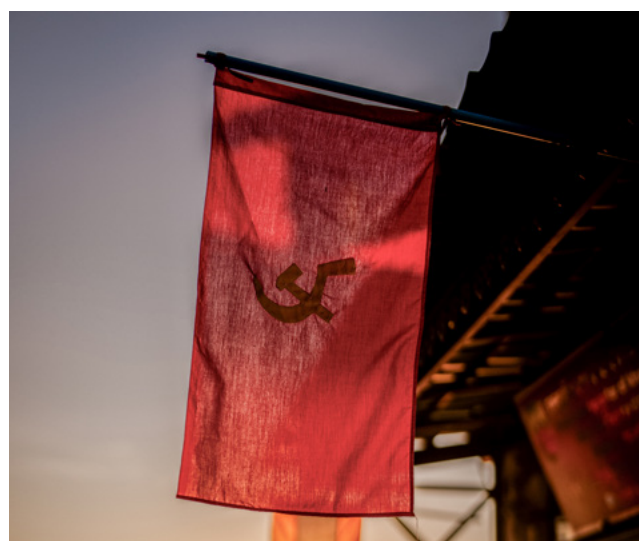
Laos has been a one-party Communist state governed by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party since 1975. Despite economic reforms in the 1980s, it remains among the world's poorest countries, heavily reliant on foreign funding, particularly from China, deepening its economic dependence on Beijing and increasing its emphasis on Communist ideology.

International observers routinely characterize the country's human rights record as exceptionally poor due to civil liberty restrictions and minority persecution ([Human Rights Watch, 1 May 2025](#)). Laos ranks 137th out of 150 countries in the World Press Freedom Index, reflecting stringent media control and suppression of dissent (World Economics, 2024).

Christians face intense persecution from local authorities and village leaders who preserve ethnic traditions, enforce state policies, maintain community stability, and uphold Communist ideology. Under Communist rule, authorities view religion as a threat

requiring control. While Buddhism is somewhat accepted as cultural heritage, Christianity is regarded as foreign, associated with Western values and opposition to Communist ideals.

According to the World Christian Database (accessed April 2025), 53.9% of Laos's population are Buddhist (mainly Theravada), 41.2% follow ethnic religions related to tribal ancestry, and 2.8% are Christian. Several folk traditions have been incorporated into Buddhism, creating overlapping statistics. Major Christian denominations officially recognized by the government include the Roman Catholic Church, Lao Evangelical Church (LEC), and Seventh Day Adventists. There are smaller numbers of Evangelicals, Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists, Lutherans, and Assemblies of God.



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

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

COMMUNIST OPPRESSION BLENDED WITH DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

Laos is one of five remaining communist countries worldwide. Faithful adherence to Communist ideology is only pronounced in a few provinces and villages that strictly oppose foreign or Western influences, including Christianity. Local authorities exploit society's hostile attitudes toward Christians to justify persecution. This persecution has intensified with Laos's growing dependence on China, which reinforces commitment to Communist principles.

CLAN OPPRESSION

Animism and tribal practices are observed throughout the country, especially in rural areas. Converting to Christianity is viewed as betraying family and community identity. Village leaders and family members often force Christians to either abandon their beliefs or face expulsion from their communities, fearing that traditional spirits will be angered by Christian practices.

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM – BUDDHISM

Theravada Buddhism is practiced by most of the population and forms the foundation of Lao culture. Buddhism functions as “the glue that binds the numerous ethnic groups and inaccessible villages scattered through the mountainous countryside”, according to a country expert. Animistic practices and fear of spirits are deeply embedded within the Buddhist culture. The government implicitly promotes Buddhism as integral to Lao national identity, while viewing Christianity as a foreign ideology that threatens this identity and national unity.



How the situation varies by region

Provinces like Luang Namtha, Phongsaly and Houphan in the north, Khammouane and Bolikhamxay in the central part and Salavan, Sekong and Attapeu in the south, have traditionally been difficult places for Christians. While some parts of Vientiane show greater tolerance toward Christian practice, rural regions experience harsher restrictions and more frequent violent incidents against believers.

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

Expatriate Christians cannot interact with local churches, except at two LEC churches in Vientiane. These communities, including diplomatic staff, face police monitoring and restrictions.

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

The government recognizes three churches: Roman Catholic Church, LEC, and Seventh Day Adventists. Despite recognition, they experience heavy surveillance. For the LEC, authorities influence leadership selection and printed materials approval.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Converts from Buddhism or Animism face the most severe persecution. Conversion is viewed as threatening government authority and betraying family and community unity.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Independent churches, Pentecostals, and Methodists remain unrecognized. They must either register under recognized denominations (which these churches often resist) or meet secretly.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Christian women face mockery, and social exclusion, with converts at greatest risk of abuse. At home, they may be beaten, disowned, or pressured to renounce their faith. Girls face harassment in schools, especially in rural areas. Christian women are stigmatized as undesirable marriage partners. The practice of child marriage, still widespread among minorities, exposes converts to intensified persecution from husbands and in-laws. When Christian men are arrested, wives bear crushing debts to secure release. Some women face eviction, trafficking, or harassment as church leaders.

Female typical pressure points:

- Forced divorce
- Violence – physical
- Violence – verbal

MEN

Christian men in Laos, especially church leaders, are frequent targets of persecution. Pastors risk arrest, harsh detention, and heavy fines, with families left burdened, and congregations destabilized. Men face workplace discrimination, often excluded from government or military positions. Military indoctrination frames Christianity as a “Western threat,” fueling further hostility. As men are usually providers, imprisonment or job loss devastates families, while children face ridicule and villages ostracize households—pressuring Christian men to abandon their faith.

Male typical pressure points:

- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence – physical



WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	28	72
2025	22	74
2024	21	75
2023	31	68
2022	26	69

Laos decreased 2 points in overall score. This was caused by the violence score dropping from 9.8 to 7.4 points, which was mainly due to fewer reports of churches attacked and no killings taking place. However, challenges remain. As Christianity has grown in some rural areas, hostility at the village level has increased, exemplified, for example, by a 38% increase in the number of Christians forced to leave their homes for religious reasons. Communist authorities heavily monitor all religious activities and converts face pressure and violence from their families and local leaders.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Fourth quarter of 2024:** Christians faced persecution in the Southern region of Laos when villagers stormed their church. The attackers removed the cross, cut the electricity supply, and demanded the Christians renounce their faith or be expelled from the village. (Open Doors research)
- Fourth quarter of 2024:** A Christian widow in southern Laos was barred from burying her husband in the village cemetery. After refusing to cremate her husband according to Buddhist customs she was fined by the village chief. Continued refusal saw elders threatening to destroy her home. (Open Doors research)
- Fourth quarter of 2024:** Four believers were arrested on 6 October during a house church gathering in the Northern region of Laos with fifteen others and banned from practicing their faith due to community opposition. After refusing to renounce their faith, the four were sentenced to one year in prison. In February, they were transferred to the District prison, held in a dark cell and not given regular meals. Two are ill, with one receiving hospital care. (Open Doors research)



WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained	Christians physically or mentally abused
2026	0	8	23	90
2025	3	18	62	196

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

Christian converts from Buddhism or ethnic religions regularly conceal their faith. If discovered, they face expulsion threats from village elders. Many Lao believe in protection from phi (spirits) and fear spiritual retribution. Christians receive deadlines to recant their faith to avoid “dooming” their villages. Refusal often leads to escalating pressure tactics, including destruction of crops or property, and ultimately violent expulsion from communities. Surveillance is particularly intense for known converts, with neighbors often reporting religious activities to authorities.

FAMILY LIFE

Buddhist and animist practices are considered essential to Lao identity. Christian children face forced participation in Buddhist temple services and rituals. Families may be denied educational opportunities and employment. Christian funeral practices face severe restrictions, believers must either pay additional fees to use village cemeteries or find private land for burials. These payments often include requirements to sacrifice animals to appease spirits, forcing Christians to participate in animistic rituals against their beliefs. Even registered LEC congregations cannot openly conduct baptisms, particularly in rural areas.

COMMUNITY LIFE

Communities exert overwhelming pressure on Christians, especially in provinces like Luang Namtha, Phongsaly, Houaphan, Savannakhet, Bolikhamxay, Khammouane, Salavan, and Attapeu.

Local authorities harass, monitor, arrest, and evict believers. Churches must provide members' personal information, including photos and contact details, facilitating government surveillance. Christians in public service face dismissal or promotion denial. Retired Christian civil servants may have pensions reduced or terminated.

NATIONAL LIFE

Though the Lao Constitution guarantees religious freedom, in practice, this right receives little protection. The government justifies restrictions by claiming religion must not conflict with state duties or cause social disruption. While Communist officials apply pressure at national levels, most violations occur through rural village leaders focused on preserving ethnic practices and Communist ideology. Christians in government positions routinely face discrimination, being overlooked for promotions despite superior qualifications and experience compared to non-Christian colleagues.

CHURCH LIFE

Church activities require government approval under Decree 315. Both plainclothes and uniformed police monitor services, counting attendees and documenting sermon content. While urban areas experience slightly more tolerance, rural churches face harsh restrictions. Recent months have seen intensified police scrutiny of Bibles and Christian literature, with increased confiscation of materials. Church leaders report growing difficulty importing religious texts and face greater requirements to submit materials for government review before distribution.



International obligations & rights violated

Laos 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](#))

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

- Christian communities and their activities are closely monitored by the authorities (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christians face discrimination in employment because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Christian children are forced to receive Buddhist religious education and to participate in religious ceremonies and festivals that are not in line with their religious beliefs (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- The state imposes strict limitations on Christian meetings that go beyond the internationally recognized and permitted limitations (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 21)
- Christians are attacked and expelled from their community for sharing about their faith (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Christians are killed because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 6.1)
- Christians are imprisoned for their faith (ICCPR Art. 9)

Situation of other religious minorities

Buddhists practicing outside mainstream Theravada teachings encounter difficulties registering as monks, with authorities viewing divergent beliefs as potentially destabilizing. The Hmong ethnic minority, predominantly animist or Christian, faces the most significant government oppression due to historical conflicts. Small Muslim, Hindu and Baha'i communities (each under 0.2% of the population) experience restrictions including limited access to worship spaces, bureaucratic obstacles to religious registration, and surveillance of religious gatherings.



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Open Doors in Laos

Open Doors works through local church partners, experts, and like-minded organizations and groups to come alongside Lao believers when they suffer persecution for choosing to follow Christ; physical attacks and expulsion from their families and communities are some examples that believers encounter. Our interventions are done through presence, relief and practical aid, and advocacy. OD also works through local partners, experts, and like-minded organizations to strengthen persecuted believers in Laos through the following efforts:

- Provision of Christian materials and literature
- Leadership training
- Discipleship programs
- Socio-economic development programs



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.

Some photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.