

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

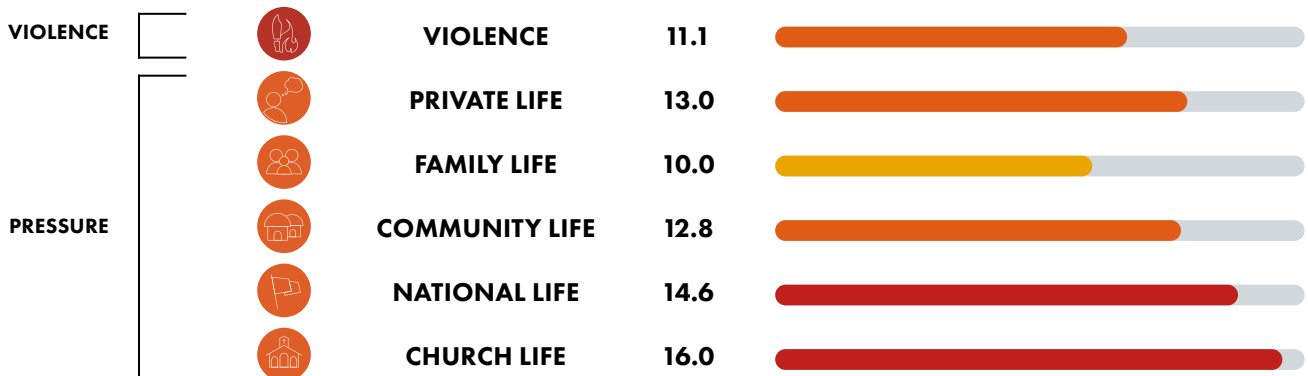
WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
19

CHINA



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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

Religion is seen as a threat by the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The CCP has officially banned 281 million Chinese people who belong to the CCP or its affiliated youth organizations from engaging in a broad range of spiritual activities. The CCP has a policy of ‘Sinicizing’ churches – bringing them under Party control by requiring them to align their doctrines, customs and morality with Chinese culture. The state-sanctioned church associations are the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM - Protestant) and the Patriotic Catholic Association (CPA). Churches not in these associations are considered illegal and called house or underground churches, though they can have hundreds of members. The government incentivizes citizens to report illegal religious activities and church leaders are facing increasing pressure to join state-approved churches. New restrictions on Internet, social media, NGOs, registration duties and the 2018 regulations on religion (with its extensions in the following years, notably the regulations for religious activity venues, implemented from 1 September 2023) are being increasingly strictly applied and all seriously limit freedom. There have been raids on and closures of churches, arrests of leaders and confiscation of Christian materials. If a convert from Islam or from Tibetan Buddhism is discovered by their community and family, they are usually threatened and physically harmed.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Xi Jinping

POPULATION

1,452,128,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

96,700,000 (OD estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Agnosticism

GOVERNMENT

Communist Party-Led State



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	96,700,000	6.7
Agnostics	465,294,250	32.0
Others	465,242,174	32.0
Buddhists	244,115,030	16.8

Source¹

The CCP has a tight grip on society, using Maoist rhetoric and ideology to keep citizens in line. President Xi Jinping came to power in 2013. In 2017, his ideas were officially [incorporated](#) into the CCP's Constitution. Several universities have opened faculties to teach these ideas, the CCP has released an app to test its members on them and much effort is being made to communicate them to citizens as young as kindergarten age. Alternative views are not permitted, and disloyal Party members are purged or sidelined. Christian faith must be abandoned to have a career in public service.

According to the Constitution, China is atheist. Books promoting atheism, such as [‘The Principles of Scientific Atheism’](#) were distributed as textbooks in colleges and among Communist Party cadres. 40% of citizens agree with Confucianism, the only philosophy praised by the government as being [truly Chinese](#), since it can incorporate Communism.

The Three-Self-Patriotic Movement (Protestant) dates back to 1954. Independent house churches are more numerous than TSPM churches but less connected and organized. The vast majority of these “house churches” have very little pastoral leadership and few resources for setting up youth work or other special areas of ministry. Most are [Pentecostal](#) in character (China Source, 13 June 2023). Simultaneously, many of the venues for TSPM churches are being forced to close down and merge with larger churches. Added to this government pressure, [new regulations](#) have come into force in 2023 which show (particularly visibly in Articles 27, 36, 39, 40) how the Communist Party is actually trying to redefine Christian priorities and values. The times when house churches gathered publicly in venues like hotels, shopping lots and office buildings and numbered in the hundreds or even thousands for one meeting are over. They split up into smaller groups of 10 to 20 and meet in various and changing locations, often in private homes.

Catholics make up only a small part of the Christian presence in China and are most numerous in the province of Hebei and in the northern and central parts of China. Apart from the CPA, there are independent Catholic churches, which adhere to the primacy of the Roman Catholic pontiff in Rome. In previous years, large churches that were active in politics or invited foreign guests were monitored and closed; now, this can happen to any church, independent or state-sanctioned. When a church is closed, it will often split into small groups and meet online.

¹ Others include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian. Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023) (*Adapted according to OD-estimate*)

Regulations govern churches [meeting online](#), [venues for religious activity](#) and even the [selection of leaders](#). Bible apps have been [banned](#) from online stores. Pastors of unregistered churches are increasingly facing accusations of economic crimes, financial fraud or the catch-all crime of ‘picking quarrels and provoking trouble’ ([WWR, 13 March 2023](#)).

China faces many challenges domestically and abroad. The country is trying to uphold the principle of non-interference and state sovereignty in the Russia-Ukraine war while supporting Russia without being seen as an official ally. The US-Chinese “decoupling” process continues with the Biden administration. These challenges, combined with the demise of the country’s real estate sector and the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, have contributed to China’s slowed economic growth (PRC Leadership Watch, 6 December 2022).

How the situation varies by region

Converts from a Muslim or Buddhist background from minority ethnic groups arguably face the most severe violations of religious freedom in China as it is driven by their families and communities as well. Consequently, hotspots are Xinjiang, Tibet and Western China with the provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan, but also Qinghai and Ningxia (where Muslim minorities can be mostly found). Many Tibetans live in the west of Sichuan, and Guizhou and Yunnan are home to many ethnic minorities as well. Yunnan, for instance, is also home to a minority of Hui Muslims.

As Protestant Christians are more concentrated in the provinces of Henan, Zhejiang, Anhui and Jiangxi, and the numbers of Catholic Christians in Hebei are high, those provinces might additionally be considered to be hotspots. However, Christians and Christian churches face increasing restrictions and monitoring countrywide and reports are coming from almost all provinces.



Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriate Christians are more free than other Christian groups, but face monitoring and limitations in their contact with local Chinese churches. Their numbers strongly declined in recent years, especially those from the West. Chinese authorities are cracking down on [foreign Christian missionaries](#), especially South Koreans, but also Americans, Taiwanese and Hongkongers.

Historical Christian communities

TSPM and CPA-related churches are government-controlled and even if there is no direct censorship, their leaders will carefully weigh their words. The election of leaders is state-influenced. [TSPM](#) and [CPA](#) have each published five-year-plans on how their churches will ‘Sinicize’ (UCA News, 17 August 2020 and 2 August 2018).

Converts to Christianity

Converts are either from a Muslim or Buddhist (Tibetan) background. Living in often volatile ethnic minority regions, they face pressure from both government and community. The government restricts any meeting it deems political or dangerous. Family, friends and the community put converts under pressure to return to the ‘true faith’ because it is an important uniting factor for ethnic groups, especially when the Communist authorities are imposing an ‘Ethnic Unity Law’.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Unlike several years ago, when congregations consisted of hundreds of members and in some provinces met openly in commercial buildings, most house churches have now returned to home gatherings. This category is seriously affected by the intensification of control and ‘Sinification’.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Communist and post-Communist oppression

Christians are the largest social body not under complete state control, and therefore seen as a threat to the Communist Party. Party rules state that any member who maintains religious beliefs after a dose of ‘strengthened thought education’ will be ‘encouraged to leave the Party’. Muslim and Tibetan leaders are sometimes co-opted by the Communist Party to act as Party officials and limit Christian activities in their regions.

Dictatorial paranoia

President Xi Jinping has consolidated his power in a manner not seen since Mao Zedong. Under Xi, the CCP has become almost militant in its efforts to maintain control. Government authorities have studied what led to the downfall of communism elsewhere. One factor is the control of social groups such as Christians, who are seen as alien and connected with foreign, mainly Western, powers. The Party puts pressure on its officials to implement anti-Christian policies and offers incentives.



How are men and women differently affected?

Women

Women lead many churches, especially house churches, and face the same risks of imprisonment as men. Generally speaking, converts from Muslim and Buddhist backgrounds face the greatest pressure. Their husbands may be pressured to divorce them because they are seen as traitors to their ethnic group. China’s (now-abandoned) one-child policy is notorious for creating a gender imbalance. The consequences of this policy interact with the vulnerability of Christian communities in neighboring countries. Female Christians from neighboring countries caught in China’s network of trafficking may be sold as brides.

Female typical pressure points:

- Forced marriage
- Imprisonment by government
- Trafficking
- Violence – sexual

Men

Although they face similar pressure to women, men and boys are at greater risk of being physically abused, such as being beaten by police officers. Male Christian leaders are particularly targeted for government surveillance. Catholic priests and high-profile house church leaders have been abducted. In these instances, men may be physically abused, including being beaten by police officers. While in detention, many men are traumatized. For those under prolonged detention, they are unable to provide financially for their families. Due to such pressure, some church leaders choose to emigrate.

Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence – physical



WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	19	78
2023	16	77
2022	17	76
2021	17	74
2020	23	70

The increase of 0.7 points in WWL 2024 shows a continually deteriorating situation and reflects that the strong pressure on churches, irrespective of whether they are government-affiliated or not, is felt nationwide. The violence score remained on the same level as the previous WWL. The scores for pressure in the 5 Spheres of Life slightly increased across almost all spheres, due to increased limitations, among them the new rules on religious activity venues, aimed at government-affiliated churches.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **8 February 2023:** Police raided a worship service at Shouwang church, Beijing, taking place in a tented venue (Bitter Winter, 14 February 2023). Shouwang church had been closed down and declared illegal in 2019.
- **10 April 2023:** Priest Father Xie Tianming of Baoding diocese, Hebei province, went missing, but reappeared on 10 April 2023 and agreed to join the Catholic Patriotic Association. At the time of reporting, he was in the process of “political re-education” (UCA News, 21 April 2023).
- **12 May 2023:** Elder Zhisheng Pan and Hua Huang of Nanchang Christian Assembly, Jiangxi province, were charged with “organizing and utilizing a religious cult” and sentenced to more than three years each (China Aid, 8 June 2023).
- **28 June 2023:** Mu En and Enoch Wang, leaders of a Christian young adults group in Hefei, Anhui province, were sentenced to three and a half and three years imprisonment, respectively, for “fraud” (China Aid, 6 July 2023).

WWL Year	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government	Christians detained	Christians physically or mentally abused	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed
2024	100*	100*	100*	1000*
2023	100*	100*	100	1000*

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

Access to online Christian content is strictly monitored by the government, if not restricted. For example, regulations mean that Bible and Koran apps have been banned from the Apple Store, and religious audiobooks banned from Audible. As one country expert sums up: “There is a deliberate push to eliminate the use of the internet to download any Christian materials over the internet.” There have been several reports of authorities forcefully entering the homes of Christians. Converts to Christianity with a Muslim or Buddhist background mostly keep their faith secret, as they could be threatened or detained by local authorities. Party and military members who convert to Christianity usually also keep their conversion a secret.

Family life

Children under 18 are banned from attending religious activities. The Party warns that religious activities are regarded as illegal behavior, which can leave children confused and sometimes angry with their Christian parents. Students can also be put under pressure to reveal their parents’ religion. In some areas, Christian children with convert parents, have been threatened with not being allowed to graduate or not being accepted for further studies. In the reporting period, a form quoting the Chinese Ministry of Education’s Higher Education policy became public, detailing how to make sure that “schools adhere to the principle of separating education and religion; no organization or individual may conduct religious activities in schools.”

Community life

Monitoring (e.g., by CCTV, neighborhood committees and security guards) is widespread, and high-profile Christians come under special scrutiny. However, according to reports obtained during the reporting period, being an active (local) church leader can be sufficient to appear on the radar of authorities and be consistently watched. The Communist Party [maintains a reward system](#) to encourage security guards to report any irregularities. This grid management system is used to monitor neighborhoods. Church leaders are often summoned for interrogation at local police stations, such as in the case of the remnants of the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu. Employment discrimination is more common in public sector jobs (e.g., all religious believers are excluded from government positions that require Party membership). There are rare cases where the government has pressured private employers to terminate contracts with religious believers. Christian converts from Muslim or Buddhist backgrounds are put under pressure by family and community to return to their original faith and face discrimination until they do.



National life

China’s Constitution recognizes freedom of religion, but allows the state to define ‘normal’ religious activity. In the WWL 2024 reporting period, there has been a plethora of cases against Christians, among other reasons, because of “illegal business operations” or “fraud”. This is becoming a new standard accusation (see list of examples above).

There are many means of discriminating against religious minorities: denying permits, conducting financial investigations aimed at uncovering foreign links, and shutting down churches due to alleged building or fire violations. As one country expert adds: “TSPM pastors are required to teach “Core Socialist Values” and “Patriotism”. If they refused to do so, they would lose their job or leave the TSPM system.” Article 39 of the 2023 regulations mentioned above, demands that ‘sermons should reflect the core socialist values’. Christians who depend on government subsidies (such as the elderly) are sometimes put under pressure by local Party officials to choose between their faith and the subsidy.

Church life

Church activities are not just monitored by agents, but also by CCTV cameras watching the pulpit, congregation and church compound. Preaching at Sunday services must be pre-approved in some parts of the country.

[Regulations](#) for religious institutions were published in May 2021 and in 2023. They mandate classes on ideological and political theory, especially Xi Jinping’s Thought. A regulation on [religious clergy](#) has also been introduced. It stipulates that clergy should love the motherland and support CCP leadership and [Sinicization](#) of churches.

Monitoring of unregistered churches is increasing, with more reports of harassment and obstruction once their activities are discovered. Most unregistered churches were forced to form small groups and gather in different locations, maintaining a low profile to avoid detection. One country expert adds: “Whereas in the past there were some channels for voicing dissatisfaction with religious policies, today no dissenting voices are allowed.”

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 and Jewish houses of worship have also been closed.

Muslims, Buddhists and adherents of Falun Gong report severe societal discrimination in employment, housing and business. Tibetan Buddhists face strong pressure from the government, especially under the new Ethnic Unity Law.

Muslims in Xinjiang suffer severe human rights violations, with up to 1 million held in re-education camps, which the government claims are necessary in the fight against radical Islam. A report by [UNHCR](#) documented these atrocities, but China put [pressure](#) on the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) not to publish the report. Details of the camps have been revealed in reports such as the China Leaks, and satellite images show their scale.



Open Doors in China

Open Doors is helping the persecuted church in China through local churches and partners.

The most persecuted Chinese Christians are divided into three groups:

- Muslim Background Believers (primarily from Islamic ethnic minorities in the North West).
- Buddhist Background Believers of China's minority people groups.
- Mainstream or Han Chinese believers.

We provide these groups with basic biblical and discipleship training, and training on biblically-sound persecution preparation. Where possible, we distribute contextualized Christian literature and extend practical assistance to families of imprisoned Christians. We also partner with churches and groups that reach out to and have ministries with children and youth below 18 years old. Minors below 18 in China are prohibited from joining any religious activities or being affiliated with any religion.



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.
