

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

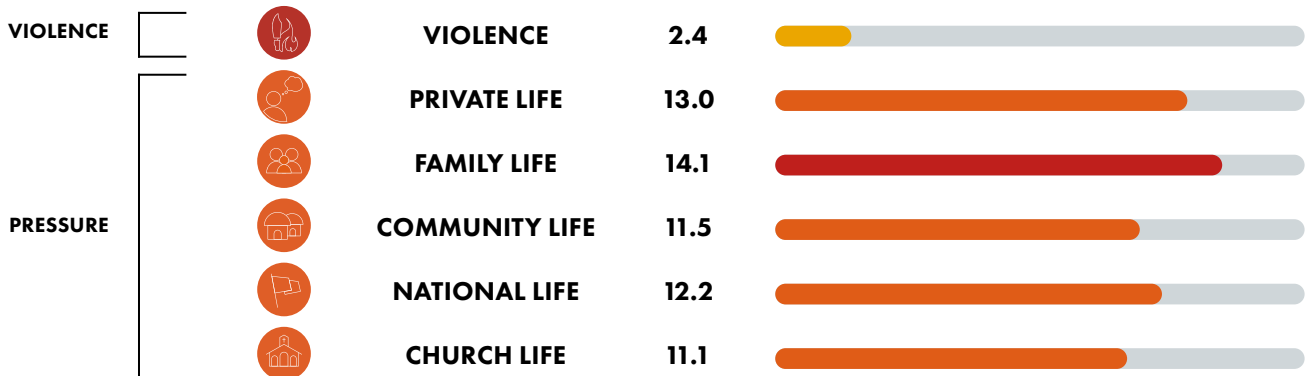
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

MALAYSIA

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
49



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

Converts from Islam to Christianity experience the most violations, as every ethnic Malay is expected to be Muslim. Whoever deviates from this is not just going against the Constitution, but also against society at large and of course against family and neighborhood. Roman Catholics, Methodists and NGOs are watched by the authorities, but non-traditional Protestant groups are more often targeted for interference as these tend to be more active in testifying about their faith. The tumultuous times in Malaysian politics since 2020 have made all Malay parties lean towards a stronger emphasis on Islam and have emboldened Islamist parties like the PAS (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party), which is leading several state governments in the federation and emerged as the largest single party in the snap general election held on 19 November 2022. It went on to consolidate its strong position in Malaysian politics in the six state elections held in August 2023. PAS members frequently make statements opposing religious and ethnic minorities, including Christians.

Quick facts

LEADER

Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim

POPULATION

33,579,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

3,096,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Federal Parliamentary
Constitutional Monarchy



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Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	3,096,000	9.2
Muslims	18,808,000	56.0
Others	6,385,900	19.0
Hindus	2,130,000	6.3

Source²

In the November 2022 snap elections, PAS (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party), which has a ruling majority in several states in the federation, emerged as the largest single party. The situation of a hung parliament was totally new to Malaysia and the country's king finally named reformist opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim as the country's 10th Prime Minister, ending days of uncertainty. Although observers said they did not observe a "green wave" in the August 2023 elections, the largest opposition party PAS strengthened its political position: apart from successfully defending the three states of Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu, PN made inroads into Penang, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan, which have been traditional strongholds of the government parties.

PAS had already made headlines when a PAS functionary congratulated the Taliban on their successful take-over of power in Kabul on 15 August

2021. A PAS member of parliament publicly called the Bible "a distorted book" in August 2020 and refused to retract this statement or apologize for it (Malay Mail, 3 September 2020). Christian minister for Youth and Sports, Hannah Yeoh, has been [accused](#) on social media and by a PAS MP of using her ministry for programs to convert Muslim youths to Christianity (UCA News, 15 March 2023), a claim lacking factual basis.

The [Malaysian Constitution](#) defines 'Malay' as a follower of Islam. There are frequent warnings from Muslim-Malay organizations and politicians against a supposed agenda of [Christianization](#). Malaysia's legal system and its political institutions are strongly influenced by Islam. All Malay children in state-run nurseries are required to attend Islamic education. At the university level, there is a compulsory subject for all students called "Islamic and Asian Civilization" which is felt by many to be a government instrument for furthering Islamization.

Although the government's motto is 'One Malaysia', the practice of discriminating against non-Malay ethnic minorities has continued unabated by giving priority in public offices and the armed forces to the 'Bumiputra' (people of the soil, or in other words, the Malay population).

The majority of Christians come from a *Bumiputra* background, which literally means "sons of the soil", meaning that they come from the indigenous

¹ Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

² 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)

tribal population. According to a country expert, from the government’s perspective, they qualify for “affirmative action” benefits such as subsidized housing, scholarships, etc., but in practice, this only applies as long as the *Bumiputra* are not Christians. If they become Christians, their privileges are quickly withdrawn. Non-*Bumiputra* Christians come mainly from the Chinese and Indian ethnic minorities and are divided up into a plethora of different Christian denominations, ranging in size from small house churches to mega churches.

Converts from a Muslim-Malay background complete the picture of the Malaysian Church. These Christians face a high level of persecution as they have not only left their Islamic faith; their conversion is seen as acting against their very ethnicity and nation as well.

How the situation varies by region

There are no hotspots of persecution for Christians in Malaysia. However, the Islamic missionary work among Christians (*dawah*) - especially among the *Bumiputra* - focuses on communities in East Malaysia, but is not limited to that region as a [report](#) from the Western Malaysian state of Pahang shows (Cilisos, 10 May 2021). State-supported plans

for conversion to Islam have been published. Helped by the number of migrating Muslims, the religious affiliation in Sabah state already ceased to be Christian-majority several years ago, and Sarawak is now only a Christian majority state on paper.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

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

Historical Christian communities

These communities consist of Roman Catholic, Anglican and Methodist Christians. They suffer some discrimination, but less than converts or non-traditional communities.

Converts to Christianity

These communities consist of Roman Catholic, Anglican and Methodist Christians. They suffer some discrimination, but less than converts or non-traditional communities.

Non-traditional Christian communities

This category includes Baptists and Pentecostals. They often face monitoring, discrimination, intimidation and harassment.



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Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression blended with ethno-religious hostility

Malaysia was known as a liberal and tolerant Islamic country, but this reputation has been changing in recent years. The state government has attempted to introduce Sharia law in the State of Kelantan. The growing strength of the Islamic PAS party (explained above) draws all other Malay parties to brush up on their religious credentials, trying to win over an increasingly Islamic and conservative electorate. In custody matters, the civil court frequently decides in favor of the child's mother. In the case of non-Muslim marriages, the father may convert to Islam in order to win the custody battle because converting gives him leverage when he brings the case to the Shariah court. The police prefer to implement the Sharia court's decisions as this causes less trouble for them. The Constitution prohibits Malays from converting to other religions and limits the propagation of non-Muslim religions. Converts can experience violence and pressure to recant from families, who see it as a dishonor.

Politics and society are strongly driven by an ethnic impulse of the preservation and superiority of the Malay ethnic group. While this is clearly

blended with and dominated by religious motives, as every Malay has to be a Muslim, it plays out in the missionary dakwah movement, which has been aggressively pursuing poverty-stricken native communities in East Malaysia with lucrative incentives and benefits.

Dictatorial paranoia

Although dictatorial paranoia is certainly only a subsidiary Persecution engine in Malaysia, it is relevant for understanding the country's situation. While UMNO managed to translate its defeat in the November 2022 elections into being part of a coalition government, the corruption scandal of former Prime Minister Najib Razak and the acquittal of UMNO president and Vice-Prime Minister Zahid Hamidi of 47 graft accusations on 4 September 2023 seem to have estranged more and more Malay voters from UMNO. Although the party had predicted a demise before, it seems more voters, also among the young electorate, prefer to vote for PAS. Therefore, dictatorial paranoia will remain a constant companion of Malaysian politics. All parties claiming to defend the Malay people and their privileges chose to re-emphasize policies of preferential treatment for Malay people (instead of following a policy of equality) and play religious and racial cards.

How are men and women differently affected?

Women

Women's legal rights are undermined by provisions that make exceptions for Sharia law. Females converting from Islam to Christianity face the risk of sexual violence and/or forced marriage to a Muslim, including girls under the age of 18. Forced marriages of Christian women sometimes occur to secure financial support for the family. The COVID-19 crisis reportedly caused an increase in domestic violence, which is likely to have impacted Christians in such marriages.

Female typical pressure points:

- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Targeted seduction

- Violence – physical
- Violence – sexual

Men

Men and boys are often the target of extreme conservative Muslim groups. The persecution typically impacting Christian men comes in the form of bullying at the hands of vigilante justice or monitoring by religious authorities.

Male typical pressure points:

- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	49	64
2023	43	66
2022	50	63
2021	46	63
2020	40	62

While the scores for pressure almost remained unchanged in the WWL 2024 reporting period, the violence score decreased by 1.3 points, consequently, the overall score decreased in this range as well. Christians continued to be marginalized and disadvantaged by a Malay-first policy, and this does not seem likely to change in the foreseeable future.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

For security reasons, no details can be published here.

Private life

Malay Muslims are not legally allowed to convert from Islam in any state. The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) wants the penalty for apostasy to be death but, so far, those efforts have been stalled. Converts to Christianity from Islam can be punished or sent to an Islamic ‘purification center’ where they are pressured into returning to Islam. There is a guideline from the Fatwa Department that says that Christmas trees and decorations should not be used if a Muslim plans to attend a Christmas event. It also forbids Muslims from attending Christmas functions that have ‘speech or gestures in the form of a praise to the non-Muslim religion’.

Family life

Children born to couples where one parent is a Muslim are automatically registered as Muslims and need the consent of both parents for official conversion. All efforts of Muslims to change their religious affiliation when they have grown up end in long court procedures with very limited success. [Education is biased](#) towards a Malay and Islam-centric worldview, discriminating against minorities. All Muslim children must attend Islamic education in schools, and children of converts can be harassed, discriminated against and put under pressure to convert to Islam. It is very common for Christian children to be bullied by their peers at school and beyond, with belittling and demeaning slurs which are often intertwined with racial slurs.

Community life

Public universities are still adopting the quota system, where Bumiputra students (Malays and indigenous people) have a higher quota while non-Bumiputra students have fewer available places. Article 153 of the Constitution allows a quota system for entering the civil service. Hence, preference is given to Malays in the public sector, and ethnic and religious minorities are not accepted. Consequently, ethnic and religious minorities rarely apply for these positions. Politicians from different Malay political parties openly defend the system and partly ask for its extension.

National life

The Constitution prohibits adherents of other religions from propagating their religion among Malay Muslims. It is virtually impossible for ethnic Malays to legally convert to Christianity since the Constitution stands against it, and they can be charged with apostasy. Non-Malay-owned companies are required to have at least one Malay as a board member. An [e-book](#) with the title ‘Exposing the Christian Agenda’ was published in Malaysia. In a decision about whether Sharia law or civil law should have precedence in case of conflict, a nine-member bench of the Federal Court of Malaysia decided that, according to the Constitution, Sharia courts do not have the right to exercise [judicial reviews](#) (Malay Mail, 21 February 2022). However, court cases are continuing and the adjudication between Sharia and civil courts remains unclear.

Church life

It is very risky for churches to integrate Malay converts, especially in West Malaysia, and so they meet in secret. Church leaders have been natural targets for hostility from religion-based or ethnic groups, especially when their churches are perceived to engage in acts of evangelism among Muslims. The abduction of Pastor Raymond Koh in broad daylight in February 2017 sent shockwaves through the Christian

community. His whereabouts is still unknown, and the perpetrators have not been found. Findings point to the involvement of the special branch of the police.

In March 2021, the High Court finally **ruled** that the ban on the use of the word 'Allah' was unconstitutional. The then-government declared to appeal this ruling, so there is still uncertainty about the use of the word 'Allah' for 'God'. The court case is still pending.

International obligations & rights violated

Malaysia has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under the following international treaties:

1. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
2. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

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

- Christian female converts run the risk of being forcibly married to Muslim men (CEDAW Art. 16)
- Christian parents cannot raise their children according to their religious values (CRC Art. 14)

Situation of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Malaysia): "The government continued to take action against some individuals who diverged from the official interpretation of Islam, including subjecting some to "rehabilitation" in centers that taught and enforced government-approved Islamic practice." (p.1) "Federal and state governments continued to forbid religious assembly and worship for groups considered to be "deviant" Muslim groups, including Shia, Ahmadiyya and al-Arqam. While Ahmadi Muslims in the country reported being able to maintain a worship center, government religious authorities did not allow them to hold Friday prayers, as these could only be performed in an officially registered mosque." (p.17)



Open Doors in Malaysia

Open Doors' work to strengthen the church in Malaysia includes the following:

- Discipling and equipping Christians on how to respond biblically to persecution and be obedient to God, especially the Great Commission
- Providing local language Bibles and other Christian literature
- Facilitating gatherings to foster unity and overcome racial divisions
- Providing socio-economic assistance to needy believers



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).

Most of the photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
