WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.

15

MALI

LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE

VIOLENCE

VIOLENCE	16.7	
PRIVATE LIFE	11.1	
FAMILY LIFE	10.1	
COMMUNITY LIFE	14.7	
NATIONAL LIFE	13.0	
CHURCH LIFE	15.2	

PRESSURE
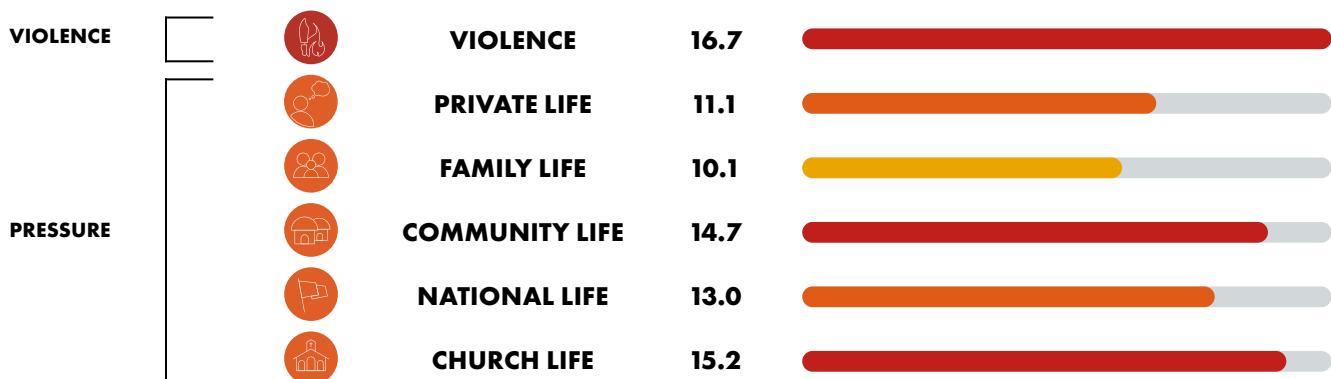
Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

Christian communities in Mali face escalating and multi-layered persecution, making many regions effectively uninhabitable for them. Jihadist groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have expanded beyond the north into central and southern Mali, targeting Christians with violence, abductions, and church burnings. Evangelical pastors and worshipers are especially vulnerable, often accused of being agents of Western influence. The threat is compounded by the convergence of Islamist militancy, organized crime, and systemic corruption. Jihadists exploit smuggling routes, illegal mining, and patronage networks, creating lawless zones where Christians, especially in rural areas, are left exposed and defenseless. Under military rule, state repression has worsened. Christian leaders and activists who speak out face surveillance, intimidation, and arbitrary detention. Civic space has sharply contracted. Converts from Islam are at greater risk. They are seen as apostates, and many experience rejection from their families and targeted attacks from extremists, who now act more openly because state authority and legal protection have weakened.

Quick facts

LEADER
President Assimi Goita (interim)

POPULATION
24,759,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS
867,000[1]

MAIN RELIGION
Islam

GOVERNMENT
Presidential system (military rule)

© Alamy

Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	867,000	3.5
Muslims	21,684,000	87.6
Ethnic religionists	2,175,000	8.8
Others	33,000	0.1
	Total	**100%**

Source[2]

Mali, once considered a symbol of religious tolerance and democratic aspiration in West Africa, is now engulfed in authoritarian rule, jihadist violence and deepening social fragmentation. Its post-1991 democratic transition and the moderating presence of Sufi Islam once fostered coexistence among diverse religious communities. However, the 2012 Tuareg rebellion and ensuing military coup marked a turning point. Northern Mali quickly fell under the control of jihadist groups, most notably al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its affiliates, who exploited weak governance and cross-border instability to impose a strict interpretation of Sharia law. Christian life in these regions became untenable.

The departure of French forces and the Malian government's 2023 request for the withdrawal of the UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA) dismantled the remaining external security pillars. In their place, Russian-linked Wagner Group mercenaries, now being replaced or/and rebranded as Africa Corps have expanded operations. They are accused of serious human rights abuses and fostering impunity rather than security. Attacks on civilians, including religious minorities, have since escalated.

Under Colonel Assimi Goïta's transitional military government, formed after the 2021 coup, the state has failed to restore territorial control or protect civilians. Despite a 2023 constitutional referendum and pledges of civilian transition by 2024, Mali has become increasingly isolated, withdrawing from both the G5 Sahel, a regional security bloc and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). This has further weakened diplomatic ties and regional conflict management mechanisms.

For Christians, especially converts from Islam and those in rural jihadist-affected zones, the situation is increasingly perilous. Church leaders face abduction, execution, or forced displacement. Churches and faith-based schools have been closed, and Christian civil servants pressured to conceal their faith. In contrast, Christians in urban centers like Bamako retain limited space for worship, though under growing scrutiny.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has identified Islamist militant groups operating in Mali as "Entities of Particular Concern." These groups also target moderate Muslims and traditional religious practitioners, promoting ideologies hostile to pluralism and coexistence.

Mali's crisis comes from long-standing problems, weak state structures, and global changes. With jihadist groups growing stronger, little accountability, and shifting political alliances, Mali is becoming even

---

[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

more unstable. For Christian communities, this means increasing danger, being pushed out of public life, and facing threats to their very survival.

How the situation varies by region

While the majority of Malian Christians reside in the southern regions around Bamako, Sikasso, and Kayes, they are increasingly affected by the expansion of jihadist influence from northern and central Mali. Northern areas like Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal, have seen militant Islamist groups extend southward, particularly in rural zones, bringing violence, intimidation and the threat of religious cleansing closer to Christian population centers.

Central regions such as Mopti and Ségou have become targets, where attacks on churches, abductions of pastors and the closure of Christian institutions have intensified.

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS
Expatriate Christians are not isolated in Mali but remain vulnerable to abduction, particularly by jihadist groups seeking ransom or leverage.

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES
Less than 3% of Malians are Christians who mostly follow Roman Catholicism. While southern communities enjoy relative religious freedom, threats of violence and kidnapping by violent Islamist groups have grown steadily.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY
Primarily found among the Bozo and Dogon peoples, converts from Islam face pressure not only from jihadist actors but also from their families and communities to renounce Christianity.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES
Charismatic and Pentecostal groups, mostly in the south, attract hostility due to their evangelistic outreach and expressive worship. Their visibility makes them more susceptible to societal backlash and extremist targeting, especially in areas where radical ideologies are gaining ground.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

ISLAMIC OPPRESSION
The 2012 collapse of moderate Islamic leadership opened space for radical Islamist factions to impose strict Sharia law, particularly in northern Mali. Churches were destroyed, Christians driven out, and religious symbols desecrated. These actors, influenced by global jihadist and Wahhabi ideologies, continue expanding into central and southern Mali. Evangelical and Catholic communities now face harassment, restrictions on gatherings, and threats against leaders. The government's failure to contain this spread has allowed extremism to flourish.

ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME
Mali's vast ungoverned spaces and porous borders have enabled a fusion of jihadism and organized crime. Armed groups, initially motivated by ideology, now profit from trafficking drugs, weapons, and people. Former Tuareg fighters and jihadist cells collaborate in illicit trade, creating gray zones where Christian communities are doubly targeted: as ideological enemies and obstacles to criminal control. Corruption within security forces further weakens protection and obstructs justice.

CLAN OPPRESSION
In areas dominated by Africa Traditional Religion (ATR), clan structures often fuse religion with ancestral authority. Converts to Christianity or dissenting Muslims are seen as betraying communal identity. Elders may respond with social exclusion, beatings, or forced displacement. With limited state oversight, these power structures enforce conformity with impunity.

DICTATORIAL PARANOIA
Since the 2021 coup, Mali's military rulers have suppressed civil liberties. Christian groups, especially those linked to foreign networks or human rights work, are viewed with suspicion. Surveillance has increased, while legal advocacy is discouraged. Requests for protection are often ignored or treated as subversive, as regime security overrides minority rights.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Resurgent attacks by Islamist militants threaten female Christians with abduction and forced marriage. Female converts are most vulnerable to harassment, threats, sexual abuse, physical violence and even killings. Unmarried converts will be forcibly married, and married converts divorced, possibly losing their children. Expulsion from family homes also increases vulnerability due to lack of support. More generally, women must adopt an Islamic dress code. The psychological trauma from these experiences can be considerable, compounding the challenges faced by Christian families and communities.

Female typical pressure points:
- Abduction
- Denied custody of children
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Trafficking
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Christian males are subjected to death threats and violent, physical attacks from Islamist militants. Those in more remote areas are at risk of abduction, death and forced recruitment at the hands of violent groups, frequently jihadists. Christian boys may be separated from their parents and moved to safer areas for protection. Targeted attacks on Christian homes and businesses are used to impoverish families and weaken communities. Christians, particularly converts, are pressured through social rejection, or reduced access to jobs or education. Married converts may also be forcibly divorced from their wives.

Male typical pressure points:
- Abduction
- Forced divorce
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

© IMB

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	15	81
2025	14	80
2024	14	79
2023	17	76
2022	24	70

With a score of 81 points, Mali ranks 15th in WWL 2026, a one-point rise from its 80 points in WWL 2025, driven by the violence block reaching its maximum level. Christians outside Bamako face acute and persistent threats: intimidation, forced displacement, extortion, and repeated attacks on churches and community life. Two major Islamist militant networks, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), dominate this landscape, enforcing strict religious control and targeting Christian presence across contested regions. Earlier factions such as Ansar Dine remain relevant because of their ideological legacy and their role in shaping the broader insurgency.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- According to local researchers, at least 10 Christians were killed in 2025 during armed attacks by extremist groups across central and northern Mali. Attacks occurred in small villages where Christians were targeted for refusing to comply with demands to abandon their faith or support insurgent activities.

- Armed groups intensified their campaign against Christian communities, attacking and destroying at least 100 churches, Christian schools, and community properties across central Mali, particularly in areas like Bandiagara, Koro, Bankass and Mopti. Worship spaces were burned, looted, or confiscated, forcing congregations to abandon their sanctuaries.

© Alamy

- Local reports confirm that Christian youth and women are increasingly targeted for abductions during night raids and village assaults, especially in Bankass, Bandiagara and Gao.

WWL Year	Christians abducted	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted
2026	100*	15	10*	26
2025	100*	47	53	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

Christians in Mali, especially converts from Islam, face severe pressure in their private life. Conversion is viewed as a betrayal of family and communal identity, resulting in emotional abuse, expulsion, or threats of violence. In the north, under jihadist control, even private prayer or owning Christian materials can lead to punishment. Many converts must hide their faith. In areas under state control, family and community surveillance still enforces religious conformity.

FAMILY LIFE

Extremist ideologies have reshaped family structures. Christian schools are targeted for closure or conversion to madrassas. Christian teachers face threats or dismissal, and children may be forced into militant-led religious instruction. Converts often face coercion from relatives to renounce their faith, leading to isolation or abuse. Family honor is used to justify religious enforcement within households.

COMMUNITY LIFE

Hostility toward Christians is growing beyond the north. In central Mali, sermons often depict Christians as threats. Churches are destroyed, believers monitored, and Christian women face abduction or forced marriage. Known Christians may be denied employment, security and social services.

NATIONAL LIFE

Though Mali's constitution protects religious freedom, militants reject state authority and enforce parallel Islamic rule. Christians lack political representation and face discrimination in the civil service. Converts, missionaries and aid workers are vulnerable to kidnapping, extortion, or execution.

CHURCH LIFE

Churches in militant zones face destruction or forced closure. Rebuilding efforts are blocked. Any association with Western NGOs or foreign troops is used to justify attacks. Christian leaders operate in secrecy, and public worship in many regions is no longer possible.

© Alamy

International obligations & rights violated

Mali 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)

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

- Christian converts are killed on the spot if their conversion is discovered or merely suspected (ICCPR Art. 6)

- Christians are targeted and killed by extremist groups on the basis of their faith (ICCPR Art. 6)

- Christians are harassed and targeted for wearing religious symbols (ICCPR Art. 18)

- Christian converts are tortured and pressured to recant their conversion from Islam (ICCPR Arts. 7 and 18)

- Christian parents cannot raise their children according to their religious values (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)

- Christians face harassment and violence if they discuss their faith or engage in proselytization (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)

Situation of other religious minorities

© Pexels

Besides Christians, Mali's other religious minorities include adherents to indigenous belief systems. Although such beliefs have historically co-existed with Islam, the rise of militant Islam has threatened that coexistence. Local Shias also face discrimination.

Open Doors in Mali

Open Doors has been involved in Mali since 2013 following the Tuareg rebellion that was hijacked by Islamist militants. In partnership with the local Church, programs we support include:

- Persecution response and strengthening the Church's prophetic voice

- Economic empowerment

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.

Open Doors Advocacy

Open*Doors*