

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

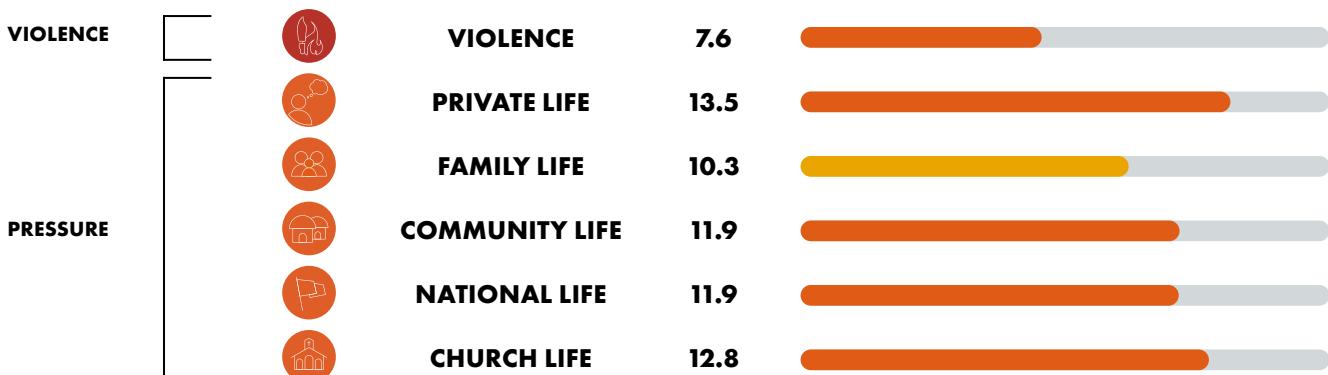
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**40**

## KYRGYZSTAN



### 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

Russian Orthodox churches experience fewer problems from the government, as they do not usually attempt to make contact with the Kyrgyz population. It is Christian converts with a Muslim background who experience the most violations. Some are locked up for long periods by their families and beaten. Local Islamic teachers preach against them and may cause them to be expelled from their communities. The local authorities have considerable power and tend to be under the influence of the local Muslim community. On 1 February 2025, a new Religion Law came into force, greatly expanding state control over religious life in Kyrgyzstan by imposing strict registration requirements, banning unregistered and public religious activity, empowering the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA) with broad oversight, and introducing harsher penalties that severely restrict freedom of religion or belief.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Sadyr Japarov

### POPULATION

6,943,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

207,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Authoritarian Presidential Republic



## Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	207,000	3.0
Muslims	6,259,000	90.1
Agnostics/Atheists	405,200	5.8
Others	71,800	1.1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source<sup>2</sup>

After independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan's Communist regime remained in power until the people revolted in 2005, known as the 'Tulip Revolution'. Kyrgyzstan was the first country to replace its post-Soviet regime with a democratically elected government. President Japarov has served since 2020 ([The Guardian, 16 October 2020](#)). Since coming to power in 2020, President Sadyr Japarov has steadily eroded democratic norms. Political opponents, media/journalists, defense lawyers, activists, civil society and human rights defenders face growing pressure through silencing, arrest, prosecution and shut down ([Human Rights Watch, 15 April 2025](#)). During 2024, the government progressively narrowed civic space, with a Russia-style "foreign agent" law requiring NGOs with foreign funding to register, label their work accordingly, and submit to excessive government oversight, risking liquidation for noncompliance ([Human Rights Watch, 11 October 2024](#)). Several journalists, bloggers, poets and writers have been found guilty of calling for mass riots, and Kloop

Media, an award-winning investigative outlet, was liquidated by court order. The ban on public protests in the center of Bishkek, which has been in place since March, has been extended until 30 June 2025. According to Amnesty International ([8 February 2024](#)) "the space for freedom of expression and association in Kyrgyzstan shrunk significantly in recent years. Over the past 18 months in particular, the authorities have intensified their campaign to stifle all forms of legitimate public criticism and peaceful dissent", especially from journalists and activists. In August 2025, President Sadyr Japarov signed a controversial media law that expands government control over independent outlets. The law requires all media, including online platforms, to register with authorities and limits foreign ownership to 35%. The [USCIRF 2025 Kyrgyzstan Chapter](#) recommended keeping Kyrgyzstan on its Special Watch List (SWL): "In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Kyrgyzstan deteriorated. The government continued to penalize peaceful religious practices, enforce restrictive, long-existing legislation and impose additional legislation that violates international standards pertaining to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB)." On 8 July 2025, [USCIRF](#) highlighted ongoing concerns about religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan, emphasizing the importance of monitoring recent amendments to the country's religion law. It was noted that the recent amendments "securitize" religion in Kyrgyzstan, restricting FoRB and potentially undermining social stability while limiting individuals' ability to live according to their conscience.

<sup>1</sup> Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

<sup>2</sup> 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

### DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

No religious activities beyond state-run and state-controlled institutions are allowed. In 2009, a religion law was introduced which imposed many restrictions. Pressure from the authorities was stepped up in 2015, and in 2025 a new Religion Law entered into force increasing state control over religious practice and severely curtailing freedom of religion or belief in the country. This new law makes the registration of church congregations almost impossible, as it requires each to have at least 500 church members. Places of worship, even for permitted registered groups, must also be registered. Moreover, all religious communities must re-register every 10 years. The SCRA holds extensive control, including arbitrary rejection of registration applications, oversight of religious education and activities, authority to ban communities, and requiring permission for preaching outside registered premises. The new law also imposes harsher penalties for violating the Religion Law, including significantly increased fines that can be issued summarily by police or the SCRA without court involvement. On 2 April 2024, President Japarov signed into law a controversial bill that allows authorities to register organizations as “foreign representatives” ([RFE/RL, 2 April 2024](#)).

### ISLAMIC OPPRESSION BLENDED WITH CLAN OPPRESSION

If indigenous Muslims convert to Christianity, they will experience pressure and occasionally physical violence from their families, friends and local community to force them to return to their former faith. Some converts are locked up for long periods by family and beaten. Local Islamic teachers preach against them, which may result in their expulsion from their communities. The Christian burial of converts frequently provokes opposition from Muslim villagers.

## How the situation varies by region

Pressure from Muslims on converts to Christianity is greater outside the major cities.

### Who is affected?

#### HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

These groups (of which the Russian Orthodox Church, ROC, is by far the largest) are not involved in evangelism among the Kyrgyz population and are not considered a threat by the authorities. The government has no interest in provoking Russia by attacking the ROC.

#### CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Because Kyrgyzstan's society is culturally Islamic, Christians with a Muslim background bear the brunt of persecution. They are under strong pressure from family, friends and community (including local authorities).

#### NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

These groups are persecuted mostly because of their evangelistic activities and youth work. They suffer occasionally from raids, threats, arrests and fines by the authorities. The 2025 new Religion Law imposes new bans on evangelism and faith sharing that affect those communities.



## How are men and women differently affected?

### **WOMEN**

Traditional Islamic culture places women at a level subservient to men within the family context. Women and girls are excluded from decision-making processes and exposed to violence in a breadth of forms, including domestic violence, bride kidnapping, child marriages and physical abuse. They are not free to choose their own faith and will face persecution upon conversion to Christianity. Converts further risk home detention, forced marriage, rape and being denied custody of their children. The practice of bride-stealing persists in Kyrgyzstan.

### **Female typical pressure points:**

- Abduction
- Denied custody of children
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced marriage
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Violence – physical
- Violence – sexual

### **MEN**

Christian men face daily discrimination, be it in the workplace, army or local community. Pressure is highest in rural areas. Christian businessmen may face boycott or hinderance. If a Christian man loses his job, it harms the whole family as he is the main provider. Converts face harassment, job loss, disinheriance, home detention and social exclusion. Pastors are targeted with fines and attacks for conversions as Muslims hold church leaders responsible for those conversions.

### **Male typical pressure points:**

- Denied communal resources
- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Economic harassment via fines
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal



## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	40	68
2025	47	66
2024	61	59
2023	59	59
2022	59	58

Kyrgyzstan's score (68 points) is higher than last year's (around 66) due to the early effects of a new Religion Law. Pressure in three spheres of life has slightly increased in WWL 2026. A higher number of violent incidents raised the score. Pressure is strongest in the Private and Church spheres. Islamic oppression (blended with Clan oppression) dominates the Private and Family spheres, while Dictatorial paranoia prevails in the National and Church spheres. Both 'meet' in the Community sphere. Muslim families, friends, and villagers pressure converts, while the government enforces tight restrictions and control over church activities. No religious activities beyond state-run and state-controlled institutions are allowed.

## Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **13 November 2024:** Pastors Shreider and Igor Tsoy were both tortured during their time in custody and interrogation. This involved being severely beaten with an iron pole and a gun by several officers and being choked to force them to make false confessions. ([Forum 18, 22 May 2025](#))
- **13 November 2024:** At least 10 homes and places of worship of the True and Free Reform Adventists in Bishkek were raided by Officers of the National Security Committee.
- **June 2025:** Five conference leaders were detained during a Protestant conference and deported.
- **10 July 2025:** A Bishkek court sentenced Pastor Shreider to three years in jail and subsequent deportation to a general regime labor camp for "incitement of racial, ethnic, national, religious, or regional enmity".



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WWL Year	Christians forced to leave their homes	Christians detained	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians forced to leave the country
2026	30	7	10*	5
2025	10*	3	10*	0

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

Converts will try to hide their faith for fear of being discovered. Unregistered believers will be cautious and avoid wearing crosses, to avoid drawing the attention of the state. Non-traditional Protestants also need to be careful of being accused of evangelism—particularly in areas where the local authorities are strongly influenced by the Islamic community. In the context of the new law on religion, the state has increased the repression against acts of Christian worship. Christian meetings that take place anywhere except in church buildings are met with a fine.

## FAMILY LIFE

Burials of Christians are frequently denied by the local community and their rulers. The law forbids youth work by churches. Schools sometimes arrange state-funded meetings to combat “sects”, which is basically a propaganda drive against religious minorities, including Evangelical churches. Children of converts often face humiliation and insults at school from teachers and fellow pupils when it is discovered that they are Christians.

## COMMUNITY LIFE

Converts are under pressure from their community to continue as before and to attend Islamic festivities in their villages. Christians from historical churches who have joined non-traditional church groups also face pressure to revert to their original faith.

## NATIONAL LIFE

The constitution guarantees freedom of conscience and religion and bans religious groups from undertaking actions inciting religious hatred. It establishes the separation of religion and state and prohibits the pursuit of political goals by religious groups. Authorities maintained bans on 21 “religiously oriented” groups they considered extremist. The 2025 new Religion Law expanded state control over religious practice and significantly reduces freedom of religion or belief.

## CHURCH LIFE

Church registration is obligatory, but the registration process with the authorities is cumbersome and includes many restrictions. On 1 February 2025, the [new Law on Religion](#) took effect, banning any religious activity without state registration. It also imposes compulsory re-registration of religious communities every 10 years, raises the minimum number of founding members for registration from 200 to 500 adult citizens and requires even registered religious groups’ places of worship to undergo separate registration. It bans sharing religious beliefs in public or door to door, and imposes strict state control over religious education, preaching, and literature. On 19 March 2025, the True and Free Reform Seventh-day Adventist Church was banned as “extremist” during a secretive hearing. The ruling became final on 4 August 2025. Baptisms in Lake Issyk Kul are no longer possible.



## International obligations & rights violated

**Kyrgyzstan 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](#))

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

- Christians are threatened to be killed for their faith (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Churches are raided, services disrupted, and attendees are arbitrarily arrested (ICCPR Arts. 9; 18 and 21)
- Christians and their activities are monitored by the authorities and the surrounding community (ICCPR Art. 17)

## Situation of other religious minorities

The new 2025 Law on Religion affects Muslim and other religious minorities. Minority religious groups, such as Ahmadi Muslims, Falun Gong, and Jehovah's Witnesses, have faced bans or criminal cases for "extremism". Jehovah's Witnesses faced police raids, detentions, and harassment during peaceful worship in Kyzyl-Kiya and Naryn in August 2024. The Hare Krishna community in Bishkek was fined after a raid on a public event in November 2024.



## Open Doors in Kyrgyzstan

Open Doors provides immediate aid to Central Asian believers when they are imprisoned, excluded from families and communities, and deprived of livelihood and employment for their faith in Christ. We also strengthen the persecuted church in Central Asia primarily through:

- Literature distribution
- Prayer support
- Biblical training
- Children/youth training
- Women's ministry
- Presence ministry
- Social and medical ministry
- Vocational training and micro credit
- Socio-economic development projects, such as rehabilitation centers



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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.

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