

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

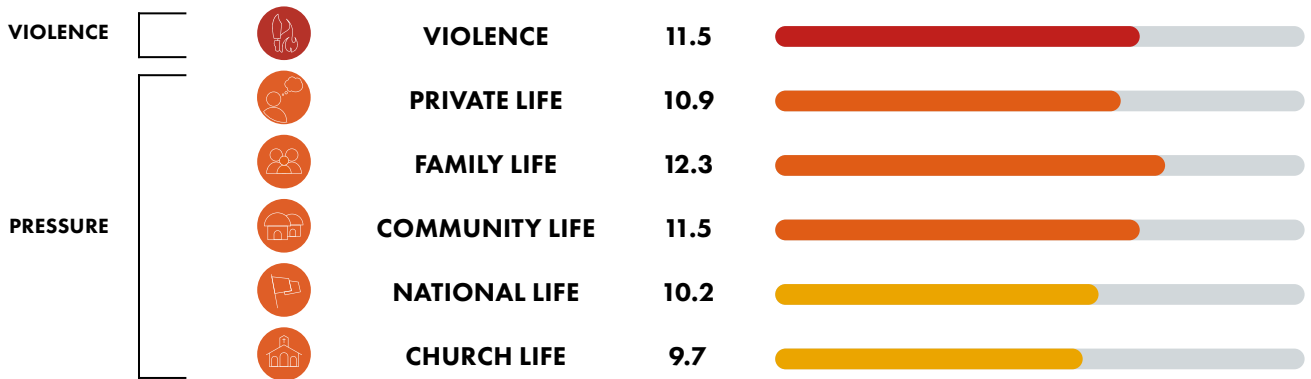
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

INDONESIA

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
42



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 to Christianity from Islam commonly experience pressure (such as isolation and verbal abuse) and very occasionally violence from their families. In hotspots, like West Java or Aceh, radical Islamic groups exert a strong influence on local politics. Once a church is seen to be proselytizing, it becomes a target. There have been more incidents of this in the reporting period. In some regions, non-traditional church groups (and even Catholics) struggle to get permission to build churches and are often ignored by local authorities.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Joko Widodo

POPULATION

281,844,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

34,562,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	34,562,000	12.3
Muslims	224,059,000	79.5
Others	6,499,200	2.3
Ethno-religionists	5,957,000	2.1

Source²

Indonesia is the fourth most populated country in the world and the largest economy in South East Asia. It consists of 17,000 islands and is one of the world's largest democracies. Moderate Islam is being challenged as society moves towards conservative Islam. In the 2019 elections, President Widodo chose conservative Islamic cleric Maa'ruf Amin as his vice-president in order to counter allegations slandering his religious credentials.

Local authorities enjoy considerable autonomy, stretching to following their own self-given rules. One example in the WWL 2024 reporting period was regions and even whole provinces like [West Sumatra](#), which have been signing off laws basing their culture and tradition on Sharia law and the Quran (Indonesia at Melbourne, 24 January 2023). Aceh province is ruled by Sharia law.

Islam is strong in the western and central parts, especially on the most populous island, Java. Christian men, especially church leaders and Christian converts from Islam, remain vulnerable to attacks from both Islamic militants and mostly local government officials.

[Authoritarianism](#) and majoritarianism are also being used in an effort to keep the country together and to balance out difficulties and tensions (Brookings, August 2020). The fact that one of the front-runners in the scheduled 2024 elections not only serves as incumbent Minister of Defense, but also has a checkered military career, illustrates that neither authoritarianism nor polarization is likely to cease in Indonesian politics anytime soon. The armed forces may even gain [more independence and influence](#) on politics after the elections (IPAC, 17 August 2023). The polarization between Islamists and so-called pluralists will continue to define Indonesian politics, as this is often seen as a method for winning over voters. The unanimous agreement by almost all parties in parliament on a [new criminal code](#) made headlines around the world for criminalizing sex outside marriage (although these would only be complaint offenses), but the chilling effect on freedom of religion and religious minorities was less in focus (The Conversation, 8 December 2022). Additionally, in the reporting period, parties supporting the incumbent government switched to campaign mode and jockeying for political positions always includes

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)

brushing up religious credentials to woo an increasingly conservative electorate.

Around a quarter of all Indonesian Christians are Roman Catholic, and they are recognized by the country's Constitution as a separate religion (while Protestants are recognized as "Christian"). Geographically, Catholics can be found throughout the archipelago, but they are a majority in the province of East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) with its island Flores and the Komodo islands.

Protestants are found throughout the country, but are more concentrated in eastern areas (such as in Papua and North Sulawesi). At the same time, there are pockets of Christianity in the western part of Indonesia, too, for e.g., Tapanuli in North Sumatra.

How the situation varies by region

The most violations against Christians are experienced in Aceh, the only province governed by Sharia law. The building of new churches in Aceh is virtually impossible and converts from Islam face the strongest pressure there. Other regions where violations are experienced include West Sumatra (Sumatera Barat), Banten, West Java (Jawa Barat) and East and Central Java (Jawa Timur and Jawa Tengah).

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

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

Historical Christian communities

Historic communities include the Roman Catholic Church and churches related to various ethnicities, such as the Batak Christian Protestant Church. They are monitored and experience opposition if they grow in number. Historical churches in poorer regions like Papua, East Nusa Tenggara and Mentawai are subject to aggressive [Islamization attempts](#), especially among children.

Converts to Christianity

Converts to Christianity from a Muslim background are closely monitored and put under pressure to give up their new faith. Similarly, on the predominantly Hindu island of Bali, someone who converts to Christianity will experience strong pressure from their family and community.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Baptists and Pentecostals are targeted by communities and radical Islamic groups if they proselytize. Neighbors will often attempt to hinder the building of new churches, and authorities can delay issuing permits.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression

Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world. Although the Constitution guarantees religious freedom, various regions are governed by Islamic by-laws, including Sharia law in the Province of Aceh. The province of West Sumatra passed a new law recognizing that the customs of the province are based on [Islamic law](#). Indonesia is in the process of revising important criminal codes that could seriously damage the rights of minorities in Indonesia. The current draft in the parliament is focused on the recognition of "any living law" in Indonesia. These "living laws" can be interpreted locally, meaning that local governing bodies can choose to follow Sharia regulations. Since there are no uniform "living laws" in Indonesia this might open the door to widespread rights abuses, including the all-powerful

blasphemy law that strikes fear in minority groups. This is all part of the conservative turn in Indonesian politics and society.

Despite some radical Islamic groups being banned, they continue to wield significant influence, often re-emerging under a different name. Money from Saudi Arabia is pouring into Indonesia for educational purposes and has the effect of bringing Wahhabi ideology into the country. Radical Islamic leaders instigate hatred against Christians and other religious minorities via their teaching in mosques and in the media. At times, they have even masterminded attacks. Several conservative Muslim political parties, such as the PKS, are known for pushing their goal of setting up a purely Islamic nation.

How are men and women differently affected?

Women

While the Indonesian government has recognized the ongoing issue of gender inequality, patriarchal gender norms, child marriages and high maternal mortality rates prevail. It is often challenging for victims to report incidents and access justice. Christian women and girls can be threatened with divorce, which would result in losing physical and economic security. Many women choose to keep their new faith secret, fearing violence if discovered. Occasionally, single Christian converts may be pressured into marriage. Christian women are also marginalized through enforced dress codes, frequently required to wear a hijab.

Female typical pressure points:

- Denied custody of children
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Violence – sexual

Men

In Indonesia, both female and male Christians face violations of their rights. However, for men this occurs less in the private areas of life. Instead, reports indicate that prominent male figures like Christian pastors and activists are the primary targets for public religious discrimination. They can face accusations and have to stand trials for charges such as “inciting religious hatred.” The presence of radical Islamist groups in the region has also been a threat.

Male typical pressure points:

- Imprisonment by the government



WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	42	66
2023	33	68
2022	28	68
2021	47	63
2020	49	60

The situation for Christians in Indonesia has not changed greatly, but the violence score slightly decreased from 12.8 points in WWL 2023 to 11.5 points in WWL 2024, as fewer killings were reported. The threat of attack from Islamic militants may have temporarily dropped following the arrest of dozens of radical Muslims, foiling their attacks. The level of pressure across the different spheres of life has been largely unchanged, indicating that not much has changed on the ground for Indonesian Christians.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **1 April 2023:** Authorities [closed](#) the Simalungun Christian Protestant Church (Gereja Kristen Protestan Simalungun, or GKPS) in Cigelam, Babakancikao, Purwakerta, Province West Java (Morning Star News, 6 April 2023).
- **15 September 2023:** Five Papuan youths were found dead at the mouth of the Brasa River in Dekai, the capital of Yahukimo Regency, Highland Papua Province. The youths – boys aged between 15 and 18 years old – were all members of the Protestant Tabernacle (Kingmi) Church of Papua. According to the church, the five youths regularly delivered food to the village after buying it nearby.
- **17 September 2023:** Authorities brokered a compromise and [stopped worship](#) for at least two weeks at a Gereja Bethel Indonesia church in Depok, Province West Java, after a mob protested the existence of the church (Morning Star News, 20 September 2023).

WWL Year	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained
2024	1	7	12	12
2023	2	10	8	1

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

Six religions are officially recognized. Conversion from one religion to another is legal, but conversion from Islam or Hinduism is strictly opposed by families. Converts can be expelled from home or lose custody of their children. In hotspot areas, like Aceh, East Java, Banten, West Java and West Sumatra, everyone needs to be subtle about sharing their faith to avoid provoking anger or strong pressure to return to the Muslim (or Hindu) faith, openly showing Christian symbols, for example, is not possible in Aceh province.

Family life

According to Law Number 23 of 2002, spouses who adopt a child must be of the same religion as the child's biological parents. If the religion of the child's biological parents is not known, the majority religion in the region is used as a basis. The government requires schools to provide Christian teachers for religious studies. However, schools in many places resist providing Christian teachers, resulting in Christian children attending classes on Islamic studies. Many Christian children face bullying at school because of their faith; they are sometimes called "kafir" (unbeliever). Muslim parents often forbid their children from playing with Christian children. Showing the general mindset towards Christians (and other minorities), the Ministry of Education had to withdraw a religious curriculum

for teaching [incorrect doctrines](#) about Christianity in the 2023 reporting period. This highlights one aspect of developing materials that teach about Christianity without having them checked by any Christians, Catholics or Protestants. This seems to have been amended without any problems, but the fact that Christians had not even been consulted is striking (Fides, 29 July 2022).

Community life

In provinces such as Aceh, West Sumatra, West Java, East Java, Nusa Tenggara Barat and Gorontalo, the number of Christians who are accepted to study at prestigious public universities is very limited. Most scholarships are awarded to Muslim students. Christians can be harassed and ostracized because they are considered unclean, for example by eating pork. There is a growing trend towards Muslim-only neighborhoods (Sharia housing complexes). Many Christians find it hard (or impossible) to get promoted and students can deliberately be awarded lower grades in religious education, to keep them from meeting the minimum requirements to become civil servants. According to the country researcher, in most regions, Religious Harmony Forums have exclusively Muslims as members. Sometimes religious minorities have a voice, but it is not strong, the interests of the majority are prioritized.

National life

Christians are becoming more careful about expressing their religious views in public, as statements perceived as opposing Islam can lead to a charge of blasphemy. As a country expert said: “This is the number one reason why many Christians don’t share their faith in the first place. They are willing to and want to, but society tells them it’s too scary a thing. It’s better to protect the rukun (harmony) of their people rather than having to worry about what could happen to them if they speak up.” In many mosque sermons and online smear campaigns, Christians are the object of slander. The Constitution recognizes six faiths (Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism) that should be treated equally, but in practice, this is often not the case. A 2006 “Presidential Decree on Religious Harmony, Empowering Religious Harmony Forums, and Constructing Houses of Worship” makes it challenging for churches to obtain building permits.

Church life

Churches face problems in construction, and when registering congregations. According to the 2006 Ministerial Decree, a church can only operate under certain conditions. Its congregation must have at least 90 members, it should have the consent of 60 neighbors from another faith, and it needs the approval of both the regency chief (administrative subdivision of a province) and the inter-faith harmony forum. Even if a permit is obtained, radical groups can hinder access to the church.

In 2020, President Jokowi spoke out against the difficulties faced by believers of minority religions when they want to set up a place of worship. The president had announced that religious minorities should not be discriminated against, and the Presidential Decree is potentially lifted but not much has changed in practice.



International obligations & rights violated

Indonesia 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)

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

- Christian converts experience pressure and violence from their family and community to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian children are harassed because of their parents' faith (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christians face employment discrimination because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Churches face obstacles obtaining permits for the construction of new buildings (ICCPR Arts. 21 and 26)
- Christians are killed because of their faith by members of terrorist organizations (ICCPR Art. 6.1)

Situation of other religious minorities

Outside the six recognized faiths, minority groups reported problems with stating their religion on national ID cards. In an effort to control, the government supported a smartphone app called Smart Pakem. This allowed citizens to file heresy or blasphemy reports against individuals and groups that have (what the government considers) unofficial or unorthodox religious practices. Human rights organizations criticized the app, saying it could undermine religious tolerance and freedom. The app has now been removed from the Google Play Store and the Apple Store. Muslim minority groups, such as the Ahmadi and Shia, suffer violations and are under scrutiny by both the authorities and radical Sunni groups. The Hindu minority has also been marginalized.



Open Doors in Indonesia

Open Doors' work in Indonesia to strengthen the church includes:

- Discipling and equipping Christians on how to respond biblically to persecution and be obedient to God, especially the Great Commission.
- Facilitating gatherings to foster unity among churches and mission agencies
- Providing Bibles and other Christian literature
- Providing assistance to needy believers through socio-economic empowerment projects
- Providing advocacy and immediate relief to victims of persecution



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.
