

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

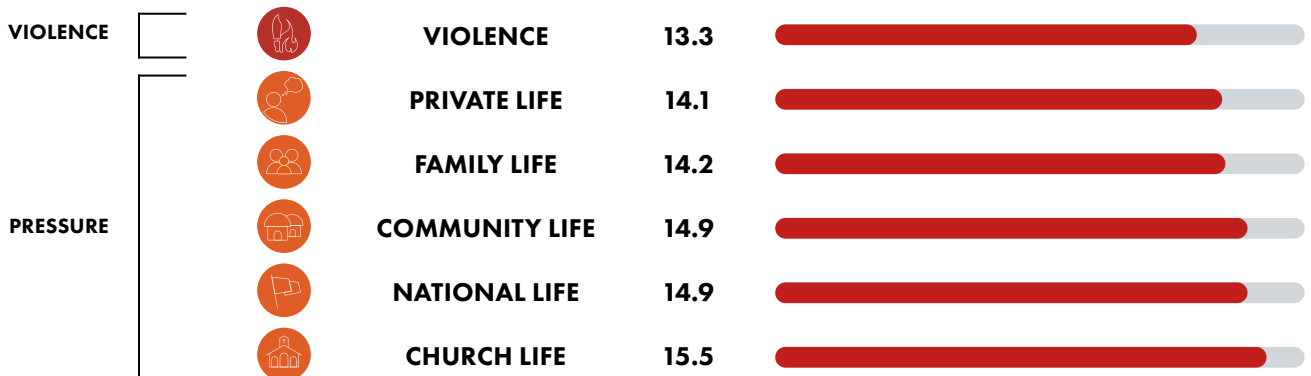
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

SUDAN

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
8



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

The landscape for Christians in Sudan has drastically worsened, particularly since November 2022. Contrary to international perceptions that heralded a shift away from repressive laws and policies, the reality on the ground for Christians is grim. First, the military successfully eliminated the civilian part of the coalition government by orchestrating a coup d'état, thereby disposing of the Prime Minister. Prior to the coup, the Sudanese government had already shown signs of reverting to its old ways. In August 2022, it indirectly reintroduced a "morality policy" under the guise of community policing. Furthermore, key figures from the previous al-Bashir regime, known for their active role in persecuting Christians, were reinstated into power by the military.

Secondly, despite the fall of the al-Bashir regime, societal perceptions of Christians have remained largely unchanged. The fear of speaking out against persecution is palpable among Christians, especially

converts and ethnic African Christians, who face severe human rights violations. The continued presence of radical groups and a lack of support from the international community have only served to compound the threats they face.

Thirdly, the Janjaweed militias remain active, contributing to the overall climate of fear and oppression. But the situation became even more volatile in April 2023 when tensions between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese army escalated. This has led to a significant amount of death, displacement and destruction. Churches have been occupied and attacked, creating an environment where Christians are even more terrified to speak against any form of persecution.

Recent internal clashes have put the country on the brink of an even deeper crisis, unraveling any perceived progress and making the plight of Christians in Sudan increasingly perilous. This reveals a stark disconnect between the international narrative and the lived experiences of Christians in Sudan, as pledges of reform ring hollow in the face of escalating threats and violence.

Quick facts

LEADER

Lieutenant-General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan

POPULATION

47,095,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

2,013,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	2,013,000	4.3
Muslims	43,434,000	92.2
Ethno-religionists	1,144,000	2.4
Agnostics	426,000	0.9

Source²

The precarious situation for Christians in Sudan has reached a critical point, particularly since the military

coup in November 2022. Despite an international narrative suggesting positive change, the stark reality for Christians—especially converts and ethnic African Christians—is one of severe persecution and constant fear. The military’s usurpation of power effectively dismantled the civilian-led transitional government and reinstated figures from the oppressive al-Bashir regime, who are notorious for persecuting Christians. Moreover, the situation deteriorated further in August 2022 when the government subtly reintroduced morality policies, masquerading them as community policing initiatives.

Sudan’s complex history, marked by the Darfur crisis, the secession of South Sudan in 2011 and the plight of the Nuba people, has created a country deeply

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

² Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

divided along religious and ethnic lines. With the majority of the population being Muslim, the country was already a difficult environment for Christians, who primarily reside in urban areas. Well-established groups of Coptic Orthodox and Greek Orthodox Christians exist in cities like Khartoum, and other large Christian denominations such as the Roman Catholic Church and various Protestant churches have communities as well. Converts from Islam face particularly severe persecution, often refraining from raising their children as Christians or holding Christian funerals to avoid attention from the government and community leaders.

The military coup in October 2022 led to ongoing protests and unrest, culminating in violent clashes between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese army in April 2023. These internal conflicts have caused extensive death, displacement and destruction, with the UNHCR reporting approximately 2.9 million people forcibly displaced as of July 2023. Among the most affected are Christians, whose churches have been targeted, occupied and attacked.

Added to this calamity is the continued activity of Janjaweed militias and other radical groups, who contribute to a climate of fear and oppression. Churches have been occupied, and Christians are increasingly terrified to speak out against any form of persecution. The situation demonstrates a troubling disconnect between the promises of reform and the escalating threats and violence on the ground. Christians in Sudan live under a shroud of fear, making any claims of progress ring hollow.

Overall, despite the international community's optimistic pledges and the formation of a transitional government aimed at democratic rule, Sudan has backslid into a state of crisis and severe repression, especially for its minority Christian population. This regression undermines any purported advances and highlights the urgent need for a reevaluation of the international narrative concerning Sudan.

How the situation varies by region

Pressure and violence targeting Christians has always been more intense outside the capital city. In addition to the harassment and threats that Christians face in their daily lives, they are affected more in areas such as Darfur, the Nuba Mountains and the Blue Nile regions as a result of the armed conflict.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriates are being forced to close their churches. These are groups mainly from Western countries and South Sudan. Their churches have been denied registration and many have faced demolition. Some expatriate Christians face arrest and detention without due legal process.

Historical Christian communities

Christians belonging to historical churches such as the Coptic Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches face violations due to both Islamic oppression and dictatorial paranoia. Former President al-Bashir had a program of church demolition, which included churches belonging to historical Christian communities.

Converts to Christianity

This group, which consists mainly of Christians with a Muslim background, experiences the most intense pressure and violence.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Sudanese Christians who belong to Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal denominations experience violations in the form of Islamic oppression and dictatorial paranoia. This group is also facing the prospect of having most of its churches in the country closed down.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression

The Muslim Brotherhood's ideology has had immense influence on Sudan's government since a coup in 1989 installed President al-Bashir as leader. The regime subsequently worked towards forming an Islamic state at the expense of other religious groups in the country. It was accused of supporting radical Islamic militants (including sheltering Osama bin Laden), sponsoring and harboring terrorism and trafficking weapons.

Dictatorial paranoia

Sudan has struggled to maintain civil order since its independence more than six decades ago. While the independence conflict with the south looks like it is finally coming to a close, the Darfur crisis, a multipolar civil war between pro- and anti-government militias, continues. In the past, government leaders have used inflammatory anti-Western rhetoric as a means to strengthen the regime in Khartoum. This has led to increased anti-Christian violence, as the government views Christians as agents of the West.

Organized corruption and crime

The government of Sudan under President al-Bashir employed all means available to stay in power, including the mobilization of tribal militias. Many of these militias committed human rights violations, including human trafficking of non-Arabs as a means to profit from the conflict. Christians, viewed as both foreign and a threat to the nation, were targeted with particular brutality by these Islamist groups.

Ethno-religious hostility blended with clan oppression

The Sudanese population consists of about 19 different ethnic groups of mostly Arab origin in the north, and African origin in the south. The Arabs have, since gaining independence, pursued a policy of Islamic and Arab superiority and nationalism.

How are men and women differently affected?

Women

In the last few years, there have been positive changes impacting women's rights and safety. In July 2020, it was announced that the apostasy law would be eliminated, that women would no longer require a permit from a male relative to travel, and that female genital mutilation (FGM) would be banned. Notwithstanding these positive developments, female Christians, particularly converts, continue to face tremendous challenges, especially in the current context of political instability and violence. They risk rape, physical violence, forced marriage and domestic violence, and incidents remain difficult to report.

Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Forced to flee town/country
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – physical
- Violence – sexual

Men

Violent Islamic militancy continues to plague many African nations and has led to an increase in persecution. The government of Sudan targets male Christians with a variety of serious false charges, including "terrorism". Church leaders are the most frequent targets and government security forces monitor their activities daily. Christian men and boys, particularly converts, are vulnerable to beatings, imprisonment, killing, workplace harassment and forced displacement. Converts may be expelled from their house and shunned by families. Others feel forced to leave their home due to the pressure of persecution.

Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- False charges
- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	8	87
2023	10	83
2022	13	79
2021	13	79
2020	7	85

The escalation of Sudan’s score in WWL 2024 can be attributed to the surge in violence against Christians. Elements antagonistic to the Christian community exploited the conflict between the army and RSF forces to intensify their targeting of Christians. Deliberate attacks on Christian properties and churches by both warring factions significantly contributed to the upsurge in the violence score.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **13 May 2023:** The Al-Masalma Coptic Church [came under attack](#) in Omdurman and the church guard was also stabbed as armed looters took over the building (Premier Christian News, 17 May 2023)
- **14 May 2023:** “In Khartoum, RSF troops have [forcibly evacuated all priests](#) from Mary’s Coptic Orthodox Church including Bishop Elia, the Bishop of Khartoum and South Sudan to convert the building into a military base. CSW reports that the military forces intimidated and harassed church members for days before forcing them to leave on 14th May.” (Premier Christian News, 17 May 2023)
- **19 May 2023:** A Sudanese Council of Churches statement lists a number of [churches facing pressure and violence](#) from RSF militia in Khartoum state (Binews, 19 May 2023)

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained	Christians internally displaced
2024	5	100*	10*	100*
2023	0	10*	4	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 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

Christians avoid openly discussing their faith with the local community for safety reasons; it can lead to government arrest or attack from Islamic militants. This social pressure is reinforced by constant surveillance by the community and police. Keeping Christian materials, such as Bibles, carries significant risk, especially for converts within a Muslim family. If discovered, Christians face severe pressure to return to Islam. If they resist, they risk loss of property, expulsion from the community and further acts of violence.

Family life

Attempting to raise a Christian family in Sudan is difficult given the pressure from government, community and civil violence. Because Christians are in the minority and Muslims exert so much pressure on social norms, a Christian marrying a Muslim is expected to convert to Islam. Christian children are often harassed due to their family’s faith, and converts raising Christian children might lose custody of them. Additionally, the government requires school teaching on Islam.

Community life

The communal pressure on Christians in Sudan is immense. Public order laws, based largely on the government's strict interpretation of Islamic law, are in force in Khartoum. These laws prohibit "indecent dresses" and other "offenses of honor, reputation, and public morality". Police have been known to harass and arrest Christians for arbitrary violations using this pretext. Christian communities struggle to access community resources (such as clean drinking water). This is particularly true outside urban areas. The general attitude in society and the government is that Sudanese citizens should be Muslim. The government uses all available opportunities to downgrade and punish Christians by restricting them from using community resources. Christians in the Nuba Mountains and other areas in the south face aerial bombardment from government forces. State-sponsored militia are also known to carry out house searches looking for Christians.

National life

Christians, especially those from South Sudan and Western missionaries, are frequently monitored by government security forces. There is great hope

that this will change, as was made public by the transitional government. Hindrances and bans occur when organizations are perceived to be critical of state institutions or are overt about the evangelistic effect of their work. Many international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are barred from the country if known to be Christian.

Church life

Churches are under significant strain in Sudan from the authorities and broader society. At the top, Sudanese officials constantly interfere in the selection of religious leaders. Christians are obstructed from building and maintaining their churches by authorities and mobs. Attempting to make repairs without the consent of the government makes Christians liable to violence. Multiple attacks have been incited by community leaders, goading the people into riots, bombings and attacks against Christians and their churches. Such violence is more common in remote areas. Sudan's infrastructure makes reaching these areas with aid and international observers extremely difficult, which enables perpetrators to carry out violence with impunity.

International obligations & rights violated

Sudan has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in 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 on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

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

- Church buildings are attacked and burnt down (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian women and girls are harassed for not covering their heads or wearing trousers (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians can be accused and charged with blasphemy (ICCPR Art. 19)
- Christian children are often harassed due to their parents' faith (CRC Art. 14 and ICCPR Art. 18)

Situation of other religious minorities

Other religious minorities, such as the Jewish community, also face serious challenges in Sudan. They are targeted by political and religious leaders on television and other forms of media. The Bahai community is not recognized in the country and can only operate in secret. Jehovah's Witnesses also face harassment. [Shia Muslims](#) are not allowed to hold worship services (US State Department, IRFR 2021). In summary, any religious group other than Sunni Islam faces tremendous challenges to exercise their faith.

Open Doors in Sudan

Open Doors' vision for Sudan is to see a resilient church that stands strong in the face of persecution and is economically empowered to support itself, through:

- Persecution preparedness programs
- Enhancing discipleship
- Facilitating economic empowerment



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).

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