

Situation of religious freedom for Christians 2024:

BURKINA FASO

World Watch List 2024 position: 20

Key Findings: In recent years, the impact of Islamist militants in the country has been expanding, making their influence felt even in cities that had previously been beyond their reach. This has particularly been the case for the "Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims" (JNIM). Christians have been targeted and killed, and churches have been destroyed. Similar attacks in Niger, Mali and the greater Sahel region are making the situation in Burkina Faso very serious. Christians have been targeted in villages, churches and workplaces. Hundreds of churches have been closed due to jihadist activities. Family and community members reject converts and try to force them to renounce their Christian faith, making them afraid to express their faith in public because of such threats. The scope for religious freedom for Christians is contracting as jihadist ideologies gain traction and expand within the broader community. Christians from a Muslim background are the most persecuted Christian group in the country.

Quick Facts: Burkina Faso

Leader	President Ibrahim Traore
Population	22,721,000
Christians	5,315,000 (Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023))
Main Religion	Islam
Government	Presidential Republic

Context: Burkina Faso has long been a country in turmoil, struggling with years of political unrest and military dictatorship. The ousting of President Blaise Compaoré in 2014 after 27 years marked another turbulent chapter in its history. Burkina Faso remains one of the world's least developed countries, where nearly 80% of the population engages in subsistence farming.

The region is increasingly becoming a battleground for geopolitical influence among Western powers and Russia, exacerbating already existing problems. The human rights situation in the country dramatically worsened in 2022 and continued its downward trajectory into 2023, as documented by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the International Crisis Group. Burkina Faso has become a victim of the expansion of jihadist activity, organized crime, and corruption, adding another layer of complexity to its dire situation.

The nation has witnessed a surge in brutal attacks by Islamist armed groups, resulting in numerous civilian and military casualties. These militant groups include but are not limited to Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), Islamic State West Africa (ISWA), Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Murabitoun, Ansar Dine, and Boko Haram. This rise in jihadist activity has caused internal displacement to soar, affecting nearly 2 million people, or approximately 10% of the nation's population.

Political instability has further deteriorated the landscape, with two military coups destabilizing governance structures. The first coup in January 2022 ousted President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, leading to the establishment of a Transition Government. However, a second coup in October 2022, led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré, replaced this government with his own military regime.

In the midst of these complexities, Christian minorities in Burkina Faso face heightened persecution. They are frequently targeted by militant groups because of their religious identity, leading to loss of life, destruction of churches, and widespread displacement. Christian women and girls are particularly vulnerable to abduction, rape, and forced marriages, while boys are at risk of being conscripted into militant forces. The targeting of Christians serves not only as a human rights violation but also undermines the structural integrity of the Christian church in the country, leaving it weakened and marginalized.

How the situation varies by region: The northern and eastern parts of the country are the main areas where Christians experience the most pressure and violence, particularly outside the main cities. In the western part of the country, ethno-religious groups also put pressure on Christians.

Who is affected?

- **Communities of expatriate Christians:** Expatriate Christians are not involuntarily isolated and are therefore not treated as a separate WWL category.
- **Historical Christian communities:** The Roman Catholic Church is the most dominant Christian denomination. Most of the country's political leaders have been Catholics. Catholics face fewer violations compared to other Christian groups, but Catholic churches have been targeted in the past.
- **Converts to Christianity:** This category includes Christians of Muslim or traditional African religious backgrounds. Converts from a Muslim background experience the most serious persecution from their families and communities.
- **Non-traditional Christian communities:** Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations are concentrated mostly in the major cities. They can be targeted more often than historical Christian groups by Islamic militants because they engage in more proselytism.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

- **Islamic oppression blended with clan oppression:** Burkina Faso has experienced several Islamic radical attacks in recent years, especially in the northern region and occasionally in the capital. *Ansar ul Islam*, formed in 2016, has tried to impose its laws in the northern part of the country through violent and non-violent means. *Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslim* ("Group supporting Islam and Muslims") focuses more on combating the French presence and countries allied to France. Its preachers influence the youth into blaming their misfortune on the French and on the corruption of morals of the West. There have been attacks on churches and Christians by Islamic militants and some churches have stepped up security, fearing further attacks may be planned. The government is blamed for brutality against civilians as they try to combat terrorists that often infiltrate civilian communities.
- **Organized corruption and crime:** In many countries in the Sahel region, organized corruption enables jihadists to recruit, buy weapons, and operate with impunity. A country researcher indicated: "There is a high level of corruption in governance. Crimes such as robbery and kidnapping are being committed in various regions of the country. The government is doing little or nothing to contain such crime, even in the capital city, Ouagadougou."

How are men and women differently affected?

- **Women:** Islamic militant groups are influential in the regions, particularly the east, and central government is weak. In this context, there is high potential for abduction by militants. Females may be forced into marriage and put under intense pressure to convert to Islam. Sexual violence is a common tool for attacking Christian communities. In particular, daughters of Christian leaders can be targeted for rape. Converts from an Islamic or traditional religious background face further pressure, including forced marriage, denied education, family expulsion, death threats and house arrest.

Female typical pressure points: Abduction; Denied access to social community/networks; Denied inheritance or possessions; Forced divorce; Forced marriage; Forced out of home – expulsion; Incarceration by family (house arrest); Violence – physical; Violence – psychological; Violence – sexual.

- **Men:** Islamic militant groups operating in the Sahel region often forcefully recruit their members from countries such as Burkina Faso. Christian men and boys are targeted for forceful recruitment and physical attacks. The abduction and killing of Christian men causes fear and trauma in Christian communities, alongside economic fragility for families. Many men and boys often flee to safer areas in the country or other countries. Church leaders, mostly male, have been targeted by militants through abductions and executions.

Male typical pressure points: Abduction; Forced to flee town/country; Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Violence – death; Violence – physical; Violence – psychological.

Short description of the change in score and why: In the last five years, the score of Burkina Faso has continuously and progressively increased. On the World Watch List of 2024, Burkina Faso has increased by another four points, reaching a score of 75 and now holding the 20th position. This significant rise is intricately tied to the exacerbation of jihadist movements and the socio-economic crisis, particularly impacting Christians within the nation. The surge in violence and pressure experienced across the country, primarily targeting Christians, has been a pivotal driver behind this escalation. The expanding activity of jihadist groups has resulted in the forceful closure of numerous churches and Christian educational institutions, intensifying pressure within the church and Christian community. The deliberate targeting and fatalities among Christians have instilled an atmosphere of fear, deterring many from attending religious services or allowing their children to pursue education in such settings. Added to this, jihadist factions have assumed control in various regions, supplanting governmental functions and assuming responsibility for providing essential social services. Political unrest in the nation, which included military coups in January and October of 2022 amid worsening security crises, has made this already difficult situation even more difficult. Moreover, instability in neighboring nations like Niger and Mali has contributed significantly to the insecurity experienced within Burkina Faso. What was once a notably tolerant society has undergone a distressing transformation, displaying heightened intolerance towards non-Muslim communities. Ethnic conflicts intertwined with religious dimensions have intensified, amplifying the pressure on converts and various Christian groups. If this current trajectory remains unaddressed, Burkina Faso stands at the precipice of evolving into an increasingly hazardous and exceedingly fragile state, poised on the brink of perilous instability.

- **Private Life:** Christians, particularly converts from Islam, face hostile reactions if they discuss their faith with others. This is a new phenomenon. In some remote areas, Christians must ensure they do not have Christian materials at home because militants can come to their homes and search for such evidence. Conversion, though not forbidden by law, is opposed by Muslims in certain areas and can lead to a convert being treated as an outcast.
- **Family Life:** In some schools where leaders or founders are predominantly Muslim, Christian students face pressure to receive Islamic teaching. This has been reported in cities like Bobo Dioulasso and even in the capital, Ouagadougou. It has been reported that Islamic militants have killed teachers who did not teach Islam. Converts lose their inheritance rights. All Christian groups must make sure they do not celebrate Christian weddings or festivals in areas prone to attacks by jihadists.
- **Community Life:** Christians are targeted, especially in the northern region, which shares a border with Mali. Soum Province seems to be the epicenter of Islamic militant activity. Here, Christians have been kidnapped and security forces attacked. The Ansar al-Islam movement has launched attacks and intimidated school teachers into replacing French with Arabic as the language of instruction in schools. Schools that do not teach Islam have been burned down. Many Christians have fled their homes. Forced marriages have also been used as a weapon to force female converts to return to Islam. Where Christians are a minority they are often hindered from accessing community resources.

- **National Life:** Churches experience difficulties obtaining permits from the administrative authorities for things like purchasing land. In northern, eastern and western parts of the country where Islam is strongly represented, and radical ideology has a foothold, Christians are increasingly regarded as the enemy.
- **Church Life:** Despite the fact the country is officially secular and Christians make up over 20% of the population, many churches live in fear of attack and are closely monitored by militant groups and community leaders in the northern, eastern, and western parts of the country. In many predominantly Muslim communities, church work among the youth is very restricted. The sale or distribution of Bibles and Christian materials is not impeded by the state, but these activities cannot be carried out by converts from traditional African religions or Islam without risking serious trouble.

Situation of Other Religious Minorities: Islamic radicalization is growing in Burkina Faso. The peripheries of the country are under the influence of Islamic militants and mosques and madrassas increasingly teach radical versions of Sunni Islam, thus causing even Sufi Muslims to be under threat. In these areas, there is no place for religious minorities. It was even reported that teachers in schools were told that they should hold Quran classes or face repercussions. Anti-Islamic sentiment is rising in Burkina Faso among other vigilante armed groups.