

Situation of religious freedom for Christians 2024:

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

World Watch List 2024 position: 28

Key Findings: The already precarious situation in the Central African Republic (CAR) is further exacerbated by the looming crisis in neighboring Sudan. The potential for another round of major conflict in Sudan, particularly due to delays in elections, casts an alarming shadow over the fragile state of affairs in CAR. As Sudan navigates its own internal strife, the ripple effects threaten to further destabilize CAR, amplifying the risks for vulnerable populations like Christians.

Currently, the breakdown of law and order has reached such a level that impunity and anarchy reign, leaving no space for Christians to practice their faith in safety. Armed militias, which occupy large swaths of the country, have been responsible for an extensive list of human rights abuses, including the burning and ransacking of church buildings. Christian leaders brave enough to speak out against this violence have faced threats to their lives, compelling many in the Christian community to flee to neighboring countries like Cameroon for safety.

The lack of governance and the rule of law have resulted in thousands of Christians becoming internally displaced, often forcing them into makeshift camps where they lose their homes and means of livelihood. This also provides a breeding ground for more localized forms of persecution; particularly in the northern regions of CAR, converts to Christianity experience social ostracization and physical violence, often orchestrated by their own family members in attempts to force them to renounce their newfound faith.

Quick Facts: Central African Republic

Leader	President Faustin-Archange Touadera
Population	5,119,000
Christians	3,807,000 (Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds. , World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)
Main Religion	Christianity
Government	Presidential Republic

Context: Since its independence in 1960, CAR has been mired in violence driven by overlapping tensions between armed groups, religious and ethnic groups, and herders and farmers. The mainly Muslim group, Séléka, staged a coup in 2013 that gave rise to deadly conflict along religious and ethnic lines.

Since President Touadera was elected in 2016, he has made reconciliation his priority, and a Political Peace Agreement was signed in 2019 between the government and 14 armed groups (AP News, 2 February 2019) but this collapsed in the run-up to the December 2020 elections and the fighting has not come to an end. The government is only in control of the capital city, Bangui. The rest of the country is divided among different factions. These factors have also made the tracking of persecution more complex.

The presentation of a new constitution for a referendum by the country's president has raised concerns among the population. The presence and influence of Rwanda and the Wagner mercenary group are growing in the country. The Chadian army has also continued its operations. Many armed groups have been forming alliances with others and some groups have foreign fighters who are fighting in the country to establish a Sharia state. There are still clashes involving the mainly Muslim ex-Séléka splinters and the self-defense group, called the anti-Balaka. Although the anti-Balaka is frequently referred to as Christian, they mostly follow African Traditional Religions and churches have strongly disassociated themselves from them.

In the middle of this, it is very difficult for Christians to speak out against injustice or comment on the increasingly powerful criminal gangs that are facilitating the prevalence of the different armed factions.

The 2016 Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and this is generally upheld. Relations between Muslims and Christians are reasonable, but there are some tensions. In particular, converts from Islam to Christianity face violations and Christians living in Muslim-dominated areas have reported discrimination and attacks on churches by ex-Séléka groups. Anti-Balaka rebel groups also attack churches and any Christians who oppose their activities. Many women and girls are economically dependent on their families, which can make them vulnerable if they convert to Christianity.

In 2023, amid an already critical situation, the uncertainty and looming risk of another major conflict in not just Sudan but also South Sudan adds complex new dynamics to the crisis in the Central African Republic (CAR). This would effectively make CAR a nation increasingly encircled by countries embroiled in conflicts, thereby exacerbating its own precarious state of affairs. International aid organizations are already spread thin dealing with multiple areas of instability and human rights violations. The Roman Catholic Church is by far the largest Christian denomination. **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.

How the situation varies by region: Rights violations against Christians are most severe in the northern and eastern parts of the country, which are dominated by Muslims and where Séléka splinter groups operate. There are also difficulties for Christians in the eastern part of the country, bordering Sudan.

Who is affected?

- **Communities of expatriate Christians:** This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.
- **Historical Christian communities:** The Roman Catholic Church is the largest denomination in the country with the widest network of churches, clinics, and schools. During and after the Séléka coup, many of their churches were looted. The Catholic Church has been a strong voice calling for peace and reconciliation and has also provided places of refuge for civilians, both Muslim and Christian, fleeing attack. As a result, Catholic churches have often been targeted for attack.
- **Converts to Christianity:** Converts with a Muslim background experience opposition and pressure from family members to renounce Christianity if their conversion becomes known. Most do not worship in public due to the fear of attacks by Muslim agitators, especially in the northern Muslim-dominated areas of the country.
- **Non-traditional Christian communities:** Evangelical and Pentecostal communities have been subject to attacks by ex-Séléka militants. Recently, the number of people joining these Christian congregations has increased dramatically.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

- **Islamic oppression:** Besides the violence against Christians perpetrated particularly by the offshoots of the Séléka militia, *Islamic oppression* is also evident in the persecution of Christians by society in general in predominantly Muslim parts of the country.

- **Organized corruption and crime:** This persecution engine is particularly evident where Anti-Balaka militants attack churches and Christians. Although Anti-Balaka began as a collection of vigilante groups, they have morphed into criminal gangs. Particularly in Bangui, they have often targeted Christians and church leaders, especially those who do not subscribe to their ideals or those who oppose their violent activities. While the group claims to protect Christians, it has become evident over the years that this is untrue, since they attack Muslims and Christians alike.
- **Ethno-religious hostility blended with clan oppression:** There are two dimensions to this persecution engine – i) Animism/ATR (religious and/or cultural) and ii) tribal fighting. In CAR, ethnic and religious motives typically go together. Some ethnic minority groups are specifically targeted. For instance, Ba'aka pygmies are forcibly recruited for labor. Anti-Balaka groups sometimes force Christians into their ranks.

How are men and women differently affected?

- **Women:** Years of violence and political instability have left Christian women and girls particularly vulnerable to rape, trafficking, abduction, and forced marriage as forms of religious persecution. Sexual abuse results in shame, trauma and often pregnancy. High rates of sexual violence discourage parents in high-risk areas from sending girls to school. Dependence on family means family-driven persecution affects women more, with financial need also a significant factor. In Muslim-dominated areas, women are pressured to follow an Islamic dress code and converts face house arrest and forced marriage to older Muslims.
- **Female typical pressure points:** Abduction; Denied access to social community/networks; Discrimination/harassment via education; Economic harassment via fines; Enforced religious dress code; Forced marriage; Targeted seduction; Trafficking; Violence – physical; Violence – psychological; Violence – sexual; Violence – verbal.
- **Men:** Men can be killed for their faith or detained by radical militias. Pastors are especially targeted, falsely accused and even attacked during church services. Men are also discriminated against in jobs, as Islamic leaders occupy all marketplaces, control trade, impose large taxes on Christian businessmen, and even loot Christian-owned shops which can keep them in poverty. Christians are forcibly recruited into rebel militant groups, discriminated against in national military service, and targeted for torture and assault. Abduction, killing, threats and the tactical impoverishment of men greatly affects Christian families.
Male typical pressure points: Abduction; Denied inheritance or possessions; Imprisonment by government; Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Violence – death; Violence – physical; Violence – psychological.

Short description of the change in score and why: CAR scored similar to the score of WWL 2023.

- **Private Life:** Converts to Christianity from Islam experience severe violations from family members if their conversion becomes known. Financial help can be cut off. In the Muslim-dominated north, where Séléka splinter groups operate, converts risk their lives if they own Christian materials. When ex-Séléka fighters come into a house and find someone reading a Bible, they have been known to kill them immediately.
- **Family Life:** Often, after a spouse has converted to Christianity, extended families and the local community will put pressure on the non-convert to divorce. In addition, converts almost automatically lose family inheritance rights. In areas controlled by rebel groups, where children's parents have been killed or have been forced to flee, any children left behind remain at the mercy of the attackers. Some have been brutally killed.

- **Community Life:** The government has lost effective control over many areas. In Muslim-dominated areas, Christians are often discriminated against, especially where Sharia law is more or less officially implemented. Monitoring by some rebel groups and their supporters has been common. In the context of the ongoing conflict, Christians (especially young girls) suffer from attacks and abductions. Muslim community members usually do not want to share community resources (such as healthcare) with converts to Christianity, especially in the remote northern part of the country.
- **National Life:** In areas controlled by ex-Séléka militants, all transportation facilities are under Muslim control, making movement for Christians difficult. When violence flares up, pastors are particularly vulnerable when traveling between churches to carry out their work. In regions where rebel groups wield power, Christians are discriminated against and sometimes attacked, forcing them to flee home and country.
- **Church Life:** Although there is no official surveillance from the government, civilians are watched by various rebel groups to discover their possible links to other groups. Many attacks have been reported, with church services being interrupted and churches burned.

Situation of Other Religious Minorities: As reported by the US State Department (IRFR 2022): "International and local observers stated that Muslim civilians were disproportionately targeted, and in some instances were killed indiscriminately, by government security and Wagner Group forces during operations in the central and northwestern areas of the country." In the context of the ongoing conflict, religious minorities are not the main targets. However, adherents of small religious minorities do face challenges in the communities where they live.