

Situation of religious freedom for Christians 2024:

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

World Watch List 2024 position: 41

Key Findings: In the eastern regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo, notably in North Kivu, the situation for Christians has become increasingly perilous due to the presence of armed groups like the "Alliance for Democratic Forces" (ADF-NALU). This group, which has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS), has been particularly aggressive in targeting Christians. The scale of attacks is alarming: Christian villages have been burned down, pastors, priests, and lay Christians have been abducted, and untold suffering has been inflicted on Christian communities by the ADF and other armed factions. The area is a hotbed for more than a hundred different armed groups, making it extremely dangerous for anyone who speaks out against these organizations.

Additionally, converts from Islam as well as indigenous religions face societal and familial pressures to engage in non-Christian religious activities. Representatives from the Catholic Church, who have publicly called on the government to respect constitutional electoral deadlines, have also experienced verbal harassment and various forms of interference due to their advocacy.

Quick Facts: Democratic Republic of the Congo

Leader	President Felix Tshisekedi
Population	98,152,000
Christians	93,396,000 (Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds. , World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023))
Main Religion	Christianity
Government	Semi-Presidential Republic

Context: DRC has experienced conflict for more than 50 years between a plethora of armed rebel groups. The weak rule of law has enabled violence, including abductions, detentions, and murders of journalists, to continue with impunity. Following a long-delayed and disputed election, Felix Tshisekedi was sworn in as president in January 2019. Although the President promised to guarantee the respect of fundamental rights and released most political prisoners, fighting between security forces and armed groups, as well as militia attacks on civilians, has continued to increase. Despite being rich in natural resources, DRC struggles with inflation and corruption.

A 2023 report by [Freedom House](#) presents the persistent challenges that DRC has been facing for decades: "The political system in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is paralyzed due to the manipulation of the electoral process by political elites. Citizens are unable to freely exercise basic civil liberties, and corruption is endemic. Physical security is tenuous due to violence and human rights abuses committed by government forces, as well as armed rebel groups and militias in many areas of the country."

In the east, where the ADF is the most prominent group, the situation has been exacerbated by interference from neighboring countries. The ADF is designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the United States State Department.

Women and girls remain especially vulnerable to incidences of sexual and gender-based violence at the [hands of armed groups](#). Men and boys are vulnerable to forced recruitment into militias, as well as abductions and killings. Pastors in particular are targeted by jihadists. **How the situation varies by region:** Christians face difficulties from Islamic militants who are active in North Kivu and Ituri province.

Who is affected?

- **Communities of expatriate Christians:** This category is not included in the WWL analysis for scoring.
- **Historical Christian communities:** Roman Catholic and Protestant communities experience violations from armed groups, such as attacks on churches and intimidation of leaders. During times of political unrest, attacks on church properties and intimidation of church leaders is common. From Kinshasa, the capital, to the central Kasai Province and, more recently, the eastern North Kivu Province, churches, convents and Catholic schools have been vandalized and looted by armed groups of youths or militiamen.
- **Converts to Christianity:** Converts to Christianity (especially from Islam) are particularly found in North Kivu. They experience persecution from Islamic militants and pressure from their family and community. To a lesser extent, cross-denominational converts from Catholicism to Protestantism, or converts from African traditional religions to Christianity, also face pressure from their communities.
- **Non-traditional Christian communities:** Baptist and Pentecostal churches are growing rapidly and are targeted by the Islamist group ADF-NALU. They also face discrimination by members of historical Christian groups.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

- **Islamic oppression:** This is present in North Kivu, where militant Islamic groups such as ADF-NALU, along with people influenced by their ideology, target Christians and churches.
- **Organized corruption and crime:** Ranked 169 out of 180 on [Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index](#), corruption (and impunity for corrupt activities) is rampant in both the public and private sectors. Christians who speak against it are vulnerable to attack.
- **Dictatorial paranoia:** DRC has suffered enormously under different regimes. Former President Joseph Kabila postponed elections for two years without legal grounds. His supporters and security apparatus targeted Christians who voiced their discontent with his rule. The incumbent president, Felix Tshisekedi, came to power in December 2018 with a promise of cleaning up the mess and taking the country forward. However, so far there are no tangible reforms that increase Christians' protection against the attacks of rebel groups in the country. Corruption remains rampant, and the security apparatus remains unaccountable for their actions.

Clan oppression blends with ethno-religious hostility: Much of the violence in North Kivu, Kisangani and Kasai has an ethnic component. Some ethnic and militant leaders belong to cults or adhere to indigenous belief systems that generate hostility towards Christians.

How are men and women differently affected?

- **Women:** DRC is politically, socially and economically complex. In various regions, women are commonly treated as inferior, impacting much of their lives, including access to their children and inheritance. Christian women can face abduction, rape, sexual torture and forced labor, especially by the Islamic radical ADF group and armed groups in northeastern regions. These attacks cause psychological distress and trauma, with the shame associated with sexual violence often resulting in family and community isolation. Forced marriage and forced divorce is also a risk, especially for converts, with marriages often early marriages.

- **Female typical pressure points:** Abduction; Denied custody of children; Denied inheritance or possessions; Forced divorce; Forced marriage; Trafficking; Violence – physical; Violence – psychological; Violence – sexual.
- **Men:** In a context of violence and impunity, Christian men face maiming, abduction, forced recruitment into militia groups, forced labor, sexual mutilation, disemboweling and brutal killings. To escape kidnappers, men may be forced to pay ransoms which paralyze already impoverished families, impacting their finances for multiple years. Christian men also face discrimination at work and in accessing jobs. This persecution serves to weaken families and the wider church, especially when church leaders are targeted and if they have publicly denounced the violence.
Male typical pressure points: Abduction; Economic harassment via business/job/work access; Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Trafficking; Violence – death; Violence – physical; Violence – sexual.

Short description of the change in score and why: Democratic Republic of the Congo scored the same as last year.

- **Private Life:** In ADF-controlled areas, any expression of Christian faith is dangerous. Jihadists have [killed](#) those wearing Christian symbols, and meeting other Christians can lead to abduction or killing. Inter-denominational converts (such as Catholics who join an Evangelical church) also face pressure and discrimination from family and community, and may even be expelled from their homes. Christians who have converted from African traditional religions are pressured to adhere to traditional rituals.
- **Family Life:** In ADF-controlled areas, Christian children can be abducted from school or forced to learn Islamic scriptures. Converts (either Christians from Muslim backgrounds or Protestants from Catholic backgrounds) can lose their inheritance and be put under pressure to divorce. Forced divorce is a means of punishment for the convert, and is also motivated by fear that ADF jihadists may attack the community as revenge for a member leaving Islam.
- **Community Life:** Christian businesses have been ruined by the ADF and revolutionary groups. Travel and access to education are difficult for Christians. In eastern DRC, the abduction of girls, especially Christians, by armed groups is common. They can be forced to marry group members. Christians are monitored by their local communities; they may be reported to the police, shadowed and their communications read or listened to. In militant-controlled areas, anyone speaking out against Islamist groups risks severe violations.
- **National Life:** Violence against Christians can be perpetrated with impunity and Christians who speak out against injustice or corruption are targeted.
- **Church Life:** In conflict regions, violent attacks have left villages and churches empty. The government monitors churches and sermon content, especially churches that are seen as being 'unfriendly' to the president. In some areas, the government prevents church activities, alleging that they might turn into public disorder. The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) has not issued permits for churches since 2014.

Situation of Other Religious Minorities: The number of religious minorities in the DRC, including Muslims, is often a subject of dispute. The High Islamic Council of Congo estimates that Muslims make up approximately 14% of the country's population. However, this figure has been contested by some, leading to ongoing disagreements. Muslims in the country have voiced complaints about not receiving the same privileges and treatment as Christians.