

Situation of religious freedom for Christians 2024:

MALI

World Watch List 2024 position: 14

Key Findings: Amidst a deteriorating security landscape, the threat of radical Islamic extremism in Mali has escalated beyond its initial stronghold in the north, increasingly plaguing the southern regions as well. Christian communities, already scarred by previous attacks and the destruction of churches in 2012, find themselves in even more precarious situations. The disintegration of the country's institutions has created a vacuum that jihadist groups are eager to fill, not just threatening the nation's stability but putting Christians in particularly dire straits.

Evangelical activities now come with heightened risks of violence and kidnapping, as the fractured security apparatus struggles to curb the expanding influence of these extremist groups. Some jihadists are also coordinating attacks, adding an additional layer of complexity and danger to an already volatile situation.

Christian converts from a Muslim background are especially vulnerable. The familial and community pressure they faced before has now been exacerbated by the rise in jihadist activities. The erosion of law and order emboldens extremists to act more openly and violently against those who have converted, making the issue of religious freedom even more acute and urgent.

Quick Facts: Mali

Leader	Transitional President Assimi Goïta
Population	22,106,000
Christians	497,000 (Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds. , World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023))
Main Religion	Islam
Government	Semi-presidential republic

Context: Once a beacon of relative tolerance due to its strong record on democratic and civil liberties, along with the mitigating influence of Sufism, Mali has seen a steep decline in the security and freedoms of its Christian population. The 2012 civil war created a vacuum filled by Islamic militant groups like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), causing a severe and lasting threat to Christian communities, particularly in the northern regions where these groups are most active.

The situation has become even more precarious following the withdrawal of French troops and the call for the UN to exit the country. As international peacekeeping forces recede, the position of the Russian private military contractor, the Wagner Group, has strengthened. Accused of committing atrocities against civilians, their presence complicates an already volatile security landscape.

The Malian government, led since May 2021 by Vice President Assimi Goïta, has shown itself incapable of containing this jihadist threat. This has left Christians increasingly vulnerable, facing the grim prospects of kidnapping, forced recruitment into armed groups and forced conversions to Islam. Church-run schools have had no choice but to shut down, further exacerbating the community's sense of siege.

The plight is not uniform; while the main Christian denomination, the Roman Catholic Church, and many Protestant communities are primarily situated in major cities like Bamako, those living in rural areas find themselves in particularly perilous situations, even when serving in civil capacities such as teachers.

In June 2023, under the military government, a referendum on a new draft constitution was held. The government asserts that this will facilitate a return to constitutional and civilian rule by March 2024, as stipulated by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). However, given the existing international forces, the murky role of external actors like the Wagner Group and the government's poor track record, the outlook for Mali's Christians remains grim and uncertain.

How the situation varies by region: Even though most Malian Christians live in the south, they have come under increasing pressure as a result of the threat of increasing radical Islamic activities in the [north and north-eastern parts of the country](#). To some extent, there are small pockets of intense persecution in the southern part of the country as well.

Who is affected?

- **Communities of expatriate Christians:** Expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation in Mali. However, they are easy targets for abduction.
- **Historical Christian communities:** Less than 3% of Malians are Christian and the majority belong to historical communities, such as Roman Catholic. Those living in the south enjoy relative freedom of religion in comparison to their counterparts in the north, but the threat of violence and kidnapping by Islamist groups has increased in the reporting period.
- **Converts to Christianity:** Christians with a Muslim background are mainly found among the Bozo and the Dogon peoples. In addition to the threat from Islamist militants faced by most Malian Christians, converts face varying degrees of pressure from their family and community to renounce Christianity.
- **Non-traditional Christian communities:** These include charismatic and Pentecostal communities, which are mainly found in southern Mali. Due to their style of worship and evangelistic activities, such communities are likely to draw the hostility of society at large.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

- **Islamic oppression:** Moderate Islam in Mali was disrupted in 2012. Islamists, heavily influenced by Wahhabism and global trends of Islamic radicalization and politicization, instituted a strict Sharia regime in the north, demolishing churches and assaulting Christians. The church in southern Mali also faces increasing pressure from Wahhabi groups.
- **Organized corruption and crime:** The country is situated in the Sahel region of West Africa, containing vast desert areas that are difficult for authorities to control. Criminal gangs use this as an opportunity to smuggle drugs into Western Europe. Most gangs allied themselves with Islamist groups and persecute Christians. Many surviving Tuareg rebel forces, facing defeat by the government and its allies, have become criminal operators, reliant on the illegal trade of weapons, drugs, and people.
- **Clan oppression:** Although most of the Malian population is Muslim, they often mix their beliefs with tribal practices. Most tribal or ethnic leaders in remote parts of the country are hostile towards Muslims or Christians who oppose such practices, which can result in clashes between tribal leaders and Muslims or Christians.
- **Dictatorial paranoia:** While there has been a blatant dereliction of duty from government officials to protect Christians from persecution, the issue of *dictatorial paranoia* as an engine has come to light in recent years, especially after the most recent coup. In this context, virtually any Christian group that seeks security or protection under the law is seen as a threat to the military regime's power.

How are men and women differently affected?

- **Women:** Resurgent attacks by Islamist militants threaten female Christians with abduction and forced marriage. While this does not affect Christian girls alone, it is considered a common tactic used by Islamist militants to spread Islam and is a widely feared threat. Female converts are most vulnerable to harassment, threats, sexual abuse, physical violence and even killings. Single converts will be forcibly married, and married converts divorced, possibly losing their children. Expulsion from family homes also increases vulnerability due to lack of support. More generally, women must adopt an Islamic dress code.
- **Female typical pressure points:** Abduction; Denied custody of children; Enforced religious dress code; Forced divorce; Forced marriage; Forced out of home – expulsion; Violence – death; Violence – physical; Violence – psychological; Violence – sexual; Violence – verbal.
- **Men:** As Islamist militant attacks continue across Mali, Christian males are particularly subjected to death threats and violent, physical attacks due to their faith. Those in rural or remote areas are at risk of abduction, death and forced recruitment at the hands of violent groups, frequently jihadists. Targeted attacks on Christian homes and businesses are used to impoverish families and weaken Christian communities. Christians, particularly converts, are pressured through social rejection, or reduced access to jobs or education. Married converts may also be forcibly divorced from their wives.
Male typical pressure points: Abduction; Denied access to social community/networks; Discrimination/harassment via education; Forced divorce; Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Violence – death; Violence – physical; Violence – psychological.

Short description of the change in score and why: The rise of the score by three points is attributed to the surge in violence and the broadening of pressure in terms of geography, frequency and intensity. Over the past five reporting periods, Mali's score has been consistently rising, culminating in a score of 79 in WWL 2024.

- **Private Life:** Converts with a Muslim background experience the most difficulty in their private lives as pressure to recant is exerted by family and community members. However, any Christians living in the north of the country face harassment and violent attacks if their faith becomes widely known.
- **Family Life:** The ongoing military conflict in Mali has made the practice of Christianity risky. Unlike many Muslim-majority nations, Christianity is discouraged not by law, but because the practice of any faith other than Wahhabi Islam risks violent reprisals from Islamist groups. In the north, teachers have been intimidated and children forced to attend Quranic classes. They have also demanded that schools, many of which are operated by Christian organizations, be converted into madrassas. Muslim families will not tolerate the conversion of a family member for reasons of family honor and will likely exert pressure on a convert to renounce Christianity.
- **Community Life:** While hostility and violence are most severe in the north, it is increasing everywhere. The authorities have attempted to forbid hostile religious propaganda, but sermons in mosques have become increasingly radical in their opposition to Christians. Pressure is growing on local communities in central Mali to adopt Sharia law, despite its direct opposition to secular state law. Regions under the control of Islamist groups demolish churches and monitor anyone suspected of being a Christian. Christians face the risk of abduction, rape, forced marriage and murder.
- **National Life:** Mali is officially a secular state that respects freedom of religion, but militants in the north oppose such liberty. As a result of an almost total lack of political and social representation within society, Christians are frequently pressured into converting to Islam. Such pressure is particularly prevalent in the Malian army, security agencies and the public health and banking sectors. As a Christian, particularly as a missionary, it is extremely dangerous to travel in Mali, with multiple incidents of kidnappings and murder occurring in recent years.

- **Church Life:** Christians attempting to return and repair damaged churches in the north have been harassed and attacked. Furthermore, refugees have been forcibly halted from constructing makeshift churches under threat of violence. Often contact with Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs), UN peacekeepers, or foreign government-allied military forces is construed as 'evangelizing' by Islamist groups. Under this pretext, local community leaders and insurgent groups will carry out attacks on vulnerable Christian populations or property.

Situation of Other Religious Minorities: In addition to Christians, Mali's other religious minorities include adherents to indigenous belief systems. Although such beliefs have historically co-existed with Islam, the rise of militant Islam has threatened that coexistence. Local Shias also face discrimination.