

Situation of religious freedom for Christians 2024:

MOZAMBIQUE

World Watch List 2024 position: 39

Key Findings: Persecution of Christians in Mozambique can be attributed to a complex set of factors, painting a grim picture for the future of religious freedom in the country.

Firstly, the presence of radical Islamists, particularly in the northern regions, has made life increasingly perilous for Christian communities. These extremists have unleashed a wave of violence, targeting Christian places of worship, abducting religious leaders and killing numerous believers. Their activities are not isolated but are part of a broader ideological campaign to impose a strict interpretation of Islamic law, making Christians a specific and vulnerable target.

Secondly, the influence of drug cartels exacerbates an already tense situation. Mozambique has become a significant hub for the international drug trade, and this has given cartels a vested interest in controlling various parts of the country. Church youth workers, who often act as community leaders advocating for change, find themselves caught in a web of violence and intimidation. These criminal organizations view any form of organized social activity, including church activities, as a threat to their control over local communities.

Thirdly, the government's stance on religious freedom further compounds the issue. Official policies and practices restrict the freedom to worship and express religious beliefs openly. Churches face administrative hurdles, there are barriers to religious education, and public expressions of Christian faith often lead to scrutiny and sometimes even arrest.

Finally, the ongoing war against jihadists adds another layer of complexity. As government forces engage in violent conflicts with radical groups, Christians find themselves caught in the crossfire. Not only are they targets of extremist violence, but they also suffer from the collateral damage wrought by military operations.

Quick Facts: Mozambique

Leader	President Filipe Jacinto Nyusi (to be succeeded by Daniel Chapo in Jan 2025)
Population	34,035,000
Christians	19,184,000 (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: Mozambique became independent of Portugal in 1975. The civil war ended in 1992 with a UN-negotiated peace agreement between the then-sole party, Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO), and rebel Mozambique National Resistance (RENAMO) forces. This was followed by steady [economic](#) and political progress, undermined by the return of tensions and violence between FRELIMO and RENAMO since 2012. [Fighting erupted again](#) in 2019 when FRELIMO remained in power after [disputed election results](#).

From October 2017 onwards, there have been recurrent attacks in the north by Islamic militants who have killed many Christians and burned down Christian homes. In addition, the Islamist group *al-Sunnah wa Jama'ah* (ASWJ) has called for the removal of Christian symbols and has attacked houses belonging to Christians in some parts of Cabo Delgado Province. Christians have fled from their homes to avoid being targeted by jihadists. Coalition forces from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and Rwanda (together with advisors from other nations) have had success pushing the jihadists back. However, the impact of jihadists is expanding to the south despite the success of the government and its allies against the jihadists.

The South Asian immigrant population and the northern provinces are predominantly Muslim, particularly along the coast, while some areas of the northern interior have a strong concentration of Christian communities. Christians are more numerous in the southern and central regions, but Muslims also live in these areas.

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2021), there are Roman Catholic, Evangelical/Pentecostal Christian, "Zionist Christian" and Anglican congregations (in descending order of denominational size) in the country.

How the situation varies by region: Rights violations against Christians are most severe in the northern Cabo Delgado province, where Islamic State (IS) affiliated militants carry out violent attacks.

Who is affected?

- **Communities of expatriate Christians:** This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.
- **Historical Christian communities:** Historical Christians include the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox churches. They are frequently targeted by al-Sunnah wa Jama'ah militants.
- **Converts to Christianity:** These include converts from Islam or traditional African religions and cross-denominational converts among Christian groups. Persecution is severe if the convert is from a Muslim background living in the Muslim-dominated north; such converts are likely to be targeted for attacks by radical Muslims.
- **Non-traditional Christian communities:** Non-traditional Christian communities include Baptists and Pentecostals. Due to their focus on evangelism, Christians in these churches are regularly threatened and attacked.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

- **Islamic oppression:** Since 2017 there have been recurrent attacks against Christians by militants belonging to the IS-affiliated Islamist group, al-Sunnah wa Jama'ah (ASWJ), causing thousands to flee their homes. The capability and areas of influence of these militants continues to increase. Groups are supported financially by working with drug cartels, and through corruption involving some officials in the country.
- **Ethno-religious hostility:** In remote areas, adherents to indigenous beliefs see the rise of Christian evangelistic activities as a threat. As a result, clan leaders often complain about such church activities.
- **Dictatorial paranoia:** The government of Mozambique is not a true democracy. It is still repressive and puts pressure on some churches to support government policies. The Constitution bans all religious influence in public educational institutions. Some authorities also impose cumbersome registration requirements on religious groups. The government restricts reporting of the situation of violence in northern Mozambique.
- **Organized corruption and crime:** Mozambique has high levels of organized crime; drugs, arms, and illegal wildlife products such as ivory are widely traded at ports. The Islamist group al-Sunnah wa Jama'ah has been involved in illegal trade to fund the group's activities. Cartels threaten and commit violence against churches that are involved in work among youth and criminal gangs.

How are men and women differently affected?

- **Women:** The most common violations affecting Christian women and girls are sexual harassment, rape and forced marriage (with Mozambique having one of the highest rates of early marriage globally). This is attributed to the incursion of Islamic militants. Abduction is common across regions where jihadists and their cells exert influence. Girls are used for forced labor, with women abducted for sex and domestic chores. Converts from a Muslim or African Traditional Religion background are vulnerable to family pressures, such as forced marriage, denied inheritance and loss of child custody.

Female typical pressure points: Abduction; Denied custody of children; Denied inheritance or possessions; Forced marriage; Trafficking; Violence – physical; Violence – sexual.

- **Men:** Islamic oppression is the most common form of persecution for Christians in Mozambique, due to the role of extremist Islamic insurgents. It is reported that Christian men and boys have been killed in attacks, or have lost their farmland and properties, leaving their families challenged economically. Young boys have also been forcibly recruited into militias. A country expert comments, “every time the insurgents attack, they mainly target the men and boys in order to recruit fighters from the community.”

Male typical pressure points: Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Violence – death.

Short description of the change in score and why: During the reporting period of WWL 2023, Mozambique witnessed a notable three-point increase, maintaining a consistent score of 68. However, in WWL 2024, the country's score plateaued, indicating a persistent level of pressure and violence, particularly prevalent in the northern region, where jihadist activities persist. Despite efforts by Rwandan and Southern African forces that led to the recapture of several towns and cities from Islamic militants over the last two years or so, their influence remained notably strong. Additionally, the presence of drug cartels in certain areas further complicated the lives of Christians, particularly hindering church initiatives focused on youth engagement. Although there was a marginal decrease from 15.6 in WWL 2023 to 15.0 points in WWL 2024, violence continued to prevail at an extreme level, indicating ongoing challenges for the populace, especially Christians.

- **Private Life:** In northern areas under the influence of Islamic militants, Christians (especially converts from a Muslim background) must hide their faith or risk attack or killing.
- **Family Life:** In the north, where jihadist expansion is occurring, raising children as Christians is dangerous, particularly in areas where government forces have been forced to withdraw. Even within the community and at school, Christians are victims of harassment and discrimination. Furthermore, in some areas where Catholics are dominant, children of evangelicals face similar challenges.
- **Community Life:** Christian women and girls are under threat of abduction by Islamist insurgents in the north. Often, abductions happen after villages have been raided. In Cabo Delgado, Christians have faced harassment for not meeting Muslim religious standard requirements, as perceived by the Islamist insurgents.
- **National Life:** In the north, many churches and Christian symbols have been vandalized. The government will hinder unwelcome church views on issues such as human rights, despite the church having played a significant role in the democratization process in the post-colonial era. The government is seeking a stricter form of control over religion through a new bill currently under discussion.
- **Church Life:** Christian preaching is often monitored by the authorities for signs of government criticism, and jihadists monitor all church activity in the north. The government has been deliberately slow in issuing church licenses and is discussing a new law to regulate religious affairs. Similar to the law in Rwanda, the government wants officially trained church leaders and seeks to avoid a proliferation of small church groups.

Situation of Other Religious Minorities: Other religious minorities (such as Hindus, Buddhists, and Jews) are very few in the country; most are expatriates. There is no specific form of persecution affecting these groups. However, as stated in [IRFR 2020](#): "Religious leaders continued to express concern that a draft law on religious practices, proposed in 2019 that was still pending in parliament at year's end, could prevent religious groups that have fewer than 500 followers from registering with the Ministry of Justice. Leaders of small religious communities expressed concern that the registration requirement would prevent them from registering their organizations. According to a religious leader, the draft law would also require followers to have their identities attested by a notary, which would create an administrative barrier to religious practice." This draft law is still under consideration.

A significant number of the population still follow traditional African religions. Most adherents live in remote parts of the country and there are no reports of persecution. Many are converting to Christianity.