

Situation of religious freedom for Christians 2024:

NIGER

World Watch List 2024 position: 27

Key Findings: The plight of Christians in Niger has escalated significantly, particularly in the wake of the July 2023 coup. The coup has instilled a heightened sense of fear among the Christian community, as it is widely believed that the Wagner Group, known for their ruthless tactics, is likely to move in, especially since the Nigerien junta has called for the withdrawal of Western troops from the country. This development further exacerbates the existing challenges faced by Christians in various dimensions:

Family pressures: Converts from Islam to Christianity continue to face severe familial pressure to renounce their new faith. Tactics range from verbal threats to physical force, and the escalation of political instability makes these individual vulnerabilities even more pronounced.

Jihadist threats: The country is witnessing a surge in jihadist activities, particularly in the western and south-eastern regions. In areas under effective jihadist control, the situation for Christians is dire. Communal worship and meetings are fraught with peril, often conducted in secrecy to mitigate the risk of violent attacks.

Employment discrimination: Christians increasingly find themselves sidelined in the public sector. Employment opportunities within local government services are scant for Christians, and those who do manage to secure positions often face institutional roadblocks, including the denial of promotions, which is becoming a common practice.

Legal hurdles: The bureaucratic process for registering churches remains long and cumbersome, a state of affairs that shows little sign of improvement given the current political upheaval.

Emerging threats: The expected entry of the Wagner Group, should it materialize, poses a new and unpredictable danger to Christians, as this organization has been accused of committing atrocities against civilians in other contexts.

Quick Facts: Niger

Leader	Transitional President Abdourahamane Tchiani
Population	27,066,000
Christians	66,600 (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: Niger gained independence from France in 1960 and has since experienced a tumultuous political history, including at least four military coups. However, since 2011, the country has shown promising signs of democratization with improved freedom of the press and peaceful assembly of political and civil groups. President Mohamed Bazoum, who took office in April 2021, faces the monumental challenge of curbing the rising jihadist violence emanating from the west and south of the country. Niger is in conflict with several militant Islamist groups, including Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) along its northwestern border with Mali, and Boko Haram on its southern border with Nigeria.

The majority of Niger's population practices Islam, primarily aligned with the Tijaniya or Qadiriya Sufi orders. However, Islamist militants aim to sever these Sufi affiliations in favor of promoting Salafism.

Christianity in Niger, mostly represented by older Protestant and Catholic churches, was largely introduced by American missionary groups. Christians, particularly those who have converted from Islam, often find themselves ostracized and at times violently attacked by local communities, particularly in areas closer to the southern border. Christian women and girls are especially vulnerable to abduction and sexual violence, while boys are at risk of being forcibly recruited into militant groups.

The political landscape took a disconcerting turn in July 2023 with yet another military coup. This latest upheaval has heightened fears and uncertainties within the Christian community, adding a new layer of complexity to their already precarious situation. The coup threatens to undermine the strides made toward a multi-party democracy and could potentially escalate already rampant jihadist violence, casting a shadow over the future of religious freedom in Niger.

How the situation varies by region: Areas outside the main cities, especially outside the capital city, are where Christians experience the most persecution.

Who is affected?

- **Communities of expatriate Christians:** Expatriate Christians / missionaries face heightened danger and are at risk of abduction.
- **Historical Christian communities:** Both Protestant and Catholic churches belong to this category. They suffer from the rise in Islamic militancy in Niger and, in the past few years, have been attacked by armed groups such as Boko Haram in the departments of Diffa, near the border of Nigeria. Pastors and church leaders from these villages have been forced to flee to larger cities, fearing for their safety. Such incidents have also been observed in the department of Tillabéri. Many historical Christian communities in areas close to Nigeria live under fear of violent attack.
- **Converts to Christianity:** In some cases, the pressure on converts from Islam is particularly pronounced, especially in private, family and community Spheres of Life. Parents and relatives may oppose a family member's conversion to Christianity more than the government. Radical Islamic imams and teachers influence ordinary Muslim people to attack and chase away converts and any Christians found ministering to converts.
- **Non-traditional Christian communities:** Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal groups are present in Niger and face pressure. This category faces the same kind of pressure as historical Christian communities. Compared to converts from Islam to Christianity, this group is less vulnerable to societal pressure.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

- **Islamic oppression blended with clan oppression:** Leaving Islam is regarded as a betrayal, which causes converts to Christianity in particular to face hostility from their Muslim family and local community if their faith is discovered. The secular nature of the state, which has always meant that state and religion are kept separate, is increasingly under pressure. Muslim religious leaders of the Izala group, a radical Islamic group originating in northern Nigeria, are active in Niger and threaten the freedom of Christians. Other Islamic pressure groups like the Tariqa ("the way" in Arabic – the Sufi way of approaching Allah) are active in certain parts of the country (e.g., in Maradi and Niamey). Izala and Tariqa create pressure on minority religions and on Muslims they consider to be deviating from Islam. Niger has a history of good relations between the majority of Muslim believers and the much smaller minority faiths. Nonetheless, Niger's battle against Boko Haram has stoked local intercommunal tensions and undermined the security and freedom of Christians in the country.

- **Organized corruption and crime:** Former President Issoufou made it one of his main priorities to combat corruption within the government. Anti-corruption measures have now become law, targeting government officials, their family members and all political parties. In the same way, there are now laws to counter [conflict of interest](#) issues in awarding contracts. Bribery of public officials by private companies is officially illegal. However, corruption is a problem in the judiciary and impunity is a serious challenge facing the country. Officeholders who break the law and engage in corrupt practices attract adverse publicity but are not adequately prosecuted. This situation affects society negatively, including the Christian population.

How are men and women differently affected?

- **Women:** Like many other countries in the Sahel, women and girls are vulnerable to abduction, rape and sexual abuse by extremist groups and others. Families often do not report instances of rape out of fear it will impact the victim's marriage prospects, with the attached stigma and shame. Female converts additionally face extreme hostility from their families and local communities. They can be denied custody of their children, forced into marriage with a Muslim man and raped. Many have also been denied their inheritance rights.

Female typical pressure points: Abduction; Denied custody of children; Denied inheritance or possessions; Enforced religious dress code; Forced divorce; Forced marriage; Forced out of home – expulsion; Incarceration by family (house arrest); Violence – psychological; Violence – sexual.

- **Men:** Male converts risk being rejected by their families, chased out of their family home, or put under house arrest. Christian men in Niger can also face dismissal from their jobs, or have their business boycotted by the Muslim community. As men are usually the financial providers, this leaves his family vulnerable. Boys in particular risk abduction and forced recruitment into the ranks of militant groups, although the extent to which this particularly targets Christians is unclear.

Male typical pressure points: Abduction; Economic harassment via business/job/work access; Forced out of home – expulsion; Imprisonment by government; Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Violence – death.

Short description of the change in score and why: The score for Niger remained the same in the current reporting period.

- **Private Life:** Religion is considered a private matter by the state in Niger. However, the separation between religion and state has come under increasing pressure from radical Islamic groups such as the Izala group, who are opposed to the secular nature of the government. This adversely impacts the Christians in Niger, since the region is already very influenced by the activities of Boko Haram and AQIM.
- **Family Life:** Converts to Christianity can face extreme hostility from their families and local communities. They can be divorced, denied custody of their children, women forced into marriage to a Muslim man, and raped. Christian parents can, by law, apply for custody of the children, but in practice, Christian parents fail to succeed. Many have also been denied their inheritance rights because of their conversion to Christianity. Other Christians do not face this form of persecution and are generally allowed to practice their faith in private.
- **Community Life:** Christians with a Muslim background are treated as outcasts by the local communities and at times face violent attacks. Christians have been hindered from celebrating Christian weddings in border regions under Islamist control. Christians are not treated equally in the public sector, are rarely able to secure employment within local government services and are frequently denied promotion. Christian men in Niger can also face dismissal from their jobs because of their faith, or have their businesses boycotted by the Muslim community.

- **National Life:** The attacks by Boko Haram, Islamic State group (IS) affiliates and other radical Islamic groups continue to cause fear among the Christian community. The lack of security in the country has affected the Christian community significantly. As jihadists are targeting Christians as well as the state authorities, Christians must be careful to keep a low profile. Many Christians who have escaped the conflict are living in IDP camps such as Bosso and Yebbi in Niger, or across the southern border to Maiduguri and Yola, in Nigeria. There is also ongoing community violence.
- **Church Life:** Communal worship and meetings of Christians must be conducted with caution due to the threat of violence from militant groups. Christians have occasionally been hindered locally from gathering for meetings, and the legal process for the registration of churches is very long and difficult.

Situation of Other Religious Minorities: According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Niger): "In February 2022, authorities arrested Muslim cleric Alfa Ali Boubacar and charged him with 'production and dissemination of information prejudicial to public order and inciting violence'. He was arrested and charged because he uttered a fatwa against the regime and criticized the government for its "poor management of security in the Tillabéri Region [and] the presence of French troops in the country." Jehovah's Witnesses and Bahai, who are mostly present in major urban centers, face the threat of violence from radical Islamic groups and have to tread carefully so as not to attract too much attention or provoke persecution.