

Situation of religious freedom for Christians 2024:

SOMALIA

World Watch List 2024 position: 2

Key Findings: Christians in Somalia face extreme peril on multiple fronts. Despite military setbacks and rebellion from some clans, Al-Shabaab continues to wield substantial influence, controlling significant portions of the country. The group has also successfully infiltrated both federal and local authorities. Its reach even extends to neighboring countries like Kenya, further complicating the situation for Christians in the region. Al-Shabaab upholds a stringent form of Sharia law and has made it abundantly clear that its goal is to eliminate Christianity from Somalia. Christians discovered practicing their faith are often summarily executed.

Over the years, the danger to Christians has escalated, with Islamic militants intensifying their efforts to identify and eliminate Christian leaders. Beyond the immediate threats posed by such extremist groups, the societal structure in Somalia exacerbates the difficulties faced by Christians. The community is generally conservative, and conversion from Islam to Christianity is viewed as the ultimate betrayal, not just to one's family but also to one's clan and society at large. Merely being suspected of conversion can put one's life at imminent risk.

Quick Facts: Somalia

Leader	Prime Minister Hamza Abdi Barre
Population	17,339,000
Christians	hundreds (OD estimate)
Main Religion	Islam
Government	Federal Parliamentary Republic

Context: Since the era of President Mohamed Siad Barre, who introduced 'Scientific Socialism' in 1960, Christians in Somalia have faced extensive persecution. Barre's secular and reformist government, while undermining the Islamic identity of Somalia, found common ground with radical Muslims in their shared animosity toward Christians. During this period, Christians were expelled, church property was seized and the printing, importing and selling of Christian literature were banned. National Security Services (NSS) subjected many Somali Christians to threats, arrests, torture and even murder.

The collapse of Barre's regime in 1991 turned Somalia into a failed state, where Islamists, local militias and warlords vie for power. Despite the fractured nature of governance, Al-Shabaab controls a significant portion of the country, especially in rural areas. The group is not only limited to Somalia but has also extended its operations to Kenya and has attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to expand into Ethiopia in 2021 and 2022. It funds its operations through various illegal trades, adding a layer of complexity to the threats faced by Christians and others in the region.

Somalia's 2012 Constitution underscores Islam as the state religion and elevates Sharia law above all else, effectively banning the propagation of other religions. The overwhelming Sunni Muslim majority views Christians as culturally damaging. Identified Christian men often face boycotts, threats, torture and death, while women are at risk of sexual violence and forced marriages.

In semi-autonomous regions like Puntland and Somaliland—which have unilaterally declared independence but are not internationally recognized—the situation mirrors the rest of the country. Their constitutions also emphasize the supremacy of Islam and outlaw other faiths. Numerous attempts to open or reopen churches in Somaliland have been thwarted by local governments, often leading to the arrest of locals on charges of apostasy.

As of 2022, political turmoil adds to instability. The U.S. imposed sanctions on Somali officials for undermining democracy, and the IMF warned that funding programs could be at stake if elections were not conducted soon. Despite these pressures, Somalia inaugurated 290 new lawmakers in April 2022 and re-elected President Hassan Sheikh Mahmud for a second term in May 2022. These developments occur against a backdrop where over 70% of Somalis live below the poverty line, creating an environment where extremism can easily flourish.

How the situation varies by region: No area is safe for Christians. However, they are most at risk in areas under the control of radical Islamic militants such as al-Shabaab. These are concentrated particularly in the south and south west, including areas around Kismayo, Jamaamee, Marka and El Hur. While northern regions like Somaliland and Puntland are more stable than the south, Christians are still at extreme risk of violence.

Who is affected?

- **Communities of expatriate Christians:** This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.
- **Historical Christian communities:** This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.
- **Converts to Christianity:** Christians with a Muslim background face the most severe violations of their rights and are considered a high-value target by al-Shabaab operatives. Converts to Christianity (or those accused of being converts) have often been killed on the spot when discovered.
- **Non-traditional Christian communities:** This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

- **Islamic oppression:** Islamic militants operate freely in many regions and kill Somalis who are suspected of being converts to Christianity. As the country attempts to stabilize and form a legitimate government, political leaders and government officials tend to be overwhelmingly in favor of a strict interpretation of Sharia law.
- **Clan oppression:** Somali society is based around a strong clan identity, which is heavily intertwined with being Muslim. Family members and clan leaders view conversion to Christianity as a betrayal. As such, any Christian who is discovered is at extreme risk of immediate violence.
- **Organized corruption and crime:** Criminals profit from the lawlessness in Somalia. They work through a network of illegal trade routes and have strong connections to al-Shabaab. The money these cartels generate is used to buy weapons and fund attacks against Christians and other civilians.
- **Dictatorial paranoia:** Christians in the country face pressure from the government, which implements the laws limiting Christians' rights.

How are men and women differently affected?

- **Women:** Young female converts to Christianity remain one of the most vulnerable populations. Commonly, a woman suspected of Christianity will be humiliated in public, kept under strict house arrest, raped, abducted, forcibly married to a radical sheikh or killed. If already married, she will likely be divorced and have her children taken away to ensure that they are raised in an Islamic way. Christian women also suffer when their husbands are imprisoned or killed; many are taken advantage of by male relatives and the family often ends up impoverished.

Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied custody of children
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage

- Forced to flee town/country
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual.

Men: Somalia is a patriarchal society with high social control. Somali men suspected of conversion to Christianity face extreme violations of their fundamental rights. They are at risk of being verbally abused, physically assaulted, having their businesses taken over, imprisoned, heavily threatened, tortured, abducted or killed. Men face additional pressure because they are expected to lead their family in religious matters and can consequently be blamed if a family member converts. Families forcefully send their young men to Islamic rehabilitation centers to be trained as al-Shabaab militia, including converts.

Male typical pressure points

Denied inheritance or possessions

- Enforced religious dress code
- Imprisonment by government
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical..

Short description of the change in score and why: Somalia recorded a score of 93 points in WWL 2024. Over the last five years, the level of persecution in Somalia has consistently remained extremely high and relatively stable. These scores have ranged between 91 points during WWL 2022 and the recent peak of 93 points in WWL 2024, signifying an ongoing and persistent challenge.

- **Private Life:** Owning Christian material is strictly forbidden. If found in possession of a Bible or other printed Christian material, the person is executed with the blessing of their relatives and community. Being suspected of conversion risks severe consequences. Converts must hide their conversion to Christianity even from family members
- **Family Life:** Somali society assumes children to be Muslim. Raising children as Christian is extremely difficult, and even telling children about Christianity could risk radical members of the clan attacking the child's parents. All children must attend madrasa and take Islamic classes.
- **Community Life:** Somali society is conservative and Islamic teachings are imposed upon the population. Christian converts from a Muslim background are under constant pressure from members of their community, and monitored. Deviation from "good Muslim behavior" can be reported to groups like al-Shabaab, who carry out violent attacks on Christian groups.
- **National Life:** The Somali government believes that there are no Somali Christians, given that the Constitution forbids conversion from Islam. Freedom of expression is greatly restricted.
- **Church Life:** Christians are not allowed to consider rebuilding churches. An attempt to reopen a Catholic Church in Mogadishu was not successful. Another attempt to reopen a Catholic Church in Hargeisa was met with public outcry and hostility. There is constant monitoring to see if there are informal places of Christian worship (house churches) operating in the country.

Situation of Other Religious Minorities: No religious groups other than Sunni Islam have any meaningful rights in Somalia. In areas controlled by al-Shabaab, the situation has become so extreme that even Shia Muslims keep a very low profile. Moderate Sunnis are also targeted. Laws in Somalia prohibit the propagation of any religion other than Islam, and prohibit Muslims from converting or leaving Islam.