

WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

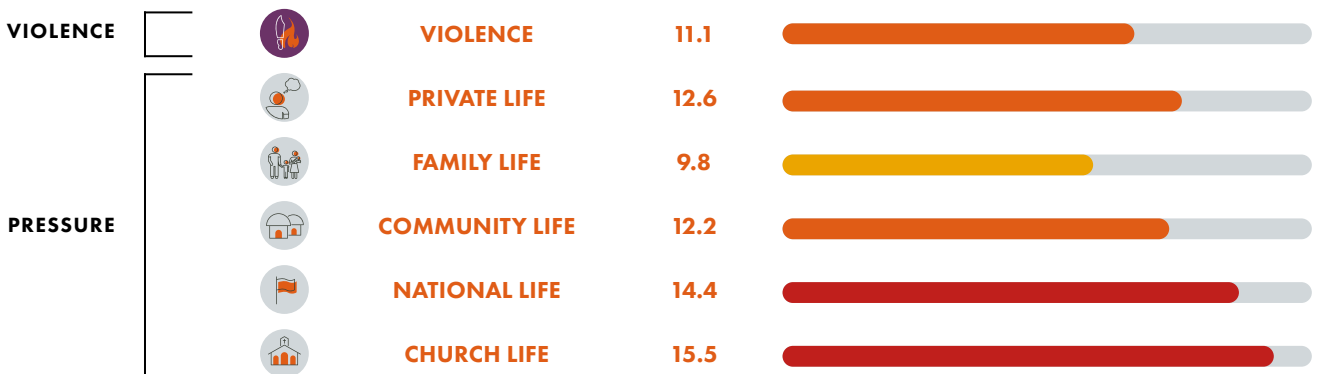
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
17

China



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).¹ Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

Key findings

Like religion in general, the Christian minority is seen as a threat by the Communist Party. The Party is implementing a policy of Sinicization of churches – bringing them in line with and under the control of the Communist Party. In earlier reporting periods mainly large churches active in politics or inviting foreign guests were monitored and closed; now this can happen to any church, independent or state-sanctioned.

¹World Watch Research measures pressure across all spheres of life as well as violence (full methodology [here](#) – password: freedom).

However, rather than publicly closing a church (building), authorities simply denied re-opening after meeting restrictions due to the pandemic were lifted. Consequently, some churches and meeting places simply vanished (meaning mostly that they split up in small groups, often meeting online). As well as the regulations on religion (newly added in the reporting period were regulations on religious clergy and religious institutions), there are strict restrictions on the internet, social media and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Bible apps were banned from online stores, but other religious content is still available. If a convert from Islam or Tibetan Buddhism is discovered by community or family, they are usually threatened, physically harmed or reported to the police. Spouses may be pressurized to divorce.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Xi Jinping

POPULATION

1,428,481,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

96,700,000 (OD estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Other

GOVERNMENT

Communist party led state



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Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	96,700,000	6.8
Buddhists	242,409,024	17.0
Agnostics	451,872,224	31.6
Others	455,872,095	31.9

OTHERS include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian. Source²

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has tightened its grip on society (including all religious activities) and increasingly uses Maoist rhetoric and ideology in order to keep citizens in line. The CCP's main method for reaching the overarching goal of staying in control is the emphasis on Communist ideology. There is rarely a public statement or meeting in which the importance of heeding Communist values is not mentioned. This has been an emphasis from the beginning of President Xi's rule in 2012, but really took off when his name

and ideas 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in a New Era' were officially incorporated into the CCP's Constitution in October 2017. Several universities have opened faculties to teach these ideas and the CCP has released an app to test its members on them. Much effort is being made to communicate his thinking to citizens through the media, higher education and even at kindergarten. Those within the Party not deemed loyal enough are purged or sidelined; Christian faith must be abandoned to have a career in public service.

Chinese churches, whether state-approved or unregistered, are increasingly affected by the CPP's new approach of actively intervening in affairs. Churches are closely monitored and under pressure to teach Communist ideology. The Regulations on religion (Administrative Measures for Religious Groups), introduced in 2020, provide the authorities with the legal basis to intervene. Those rules even govern selection of leaders. There have been raids on and closures of churches, arrests of leaders and confiscation of Christian materials. These rules have

²Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021) (Adapted according to OD-estimate)

been updated and extended by regulations pertaining to religious ministers.

According to its Constitution, China is atheist. Around 40% of citizens agree with the value of Confucianism, which is praised by the government as being [truly Chinese](#). Since it is more of a philosophy, it can incorporate Communist rulers. The government warns citizens against religious groups and incentivizes them to report illegal religious activities. Churches in Shandong Province (and increasingly elsewhere) have been forced to display government-prepared posters with Bible verses to illustrate the 12 Socialist principles. The state-sanctioned and controlled church associations are: the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM - Protestant) and the Patriotic Catholic Association (CPA). Protestant churches not belonging to the TSPM are considered illegal and called house or underground churches, though they can have hundreds of members.

How the situation varies by region

Converts from a Muslim or Buddhist background from minority ethnic groups arguably face the most severe violations of religious freedom in China, as it is driven by their families and communities. Consequently, hotspots are Xinjiang, Tibet and Western China, as well as the provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan, Qinghai and Ningxia. As Protestant Christians are more concentrated in the provinces of Henan, Zhejiang, Anhui and Jiangxi, and the numbers of Catholic Christians in Hebei are high, those provinces might be additionally considered as hotspots. However, Christians and Christian churches face restrictions and monitoring countrywide, and reports are coming from almost all provinces. The Communist Party goes to great lengths to limit the flow of such reports, with increasing success in the reporting period.



Who is affected?

[Communities of expatriate Christians](#)

Expatriate Christian communities experience more freedom compared to other Christian groups but face monitoring and limitations in their contact with local Chinese churches. However, Chinese authorities throughout the country are cracking down on [foreign Christian](#) missionaries, especially South Koreans, but also Americans, Taiwanese and Christians from Hong Kong. The Chinese authorities have published a draft of [new rules](#) for foreigners and their involvement in religious activities in China. These rules are part of a series of tightening laws on religion. The new rules limit the extent of citizens' contact with foreign worshippers in the country. The overall number of expatriate Christians is considerably declining, because of aforementioned measures, but also because of the restrictions the pandemic brought.

[Historical Christian communities](#)

This category highlights a unique factor in Chinese Christianity: there are registered and government-recognized churches – the TSPM and the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) – and non-registered, independent churches. On the Roman Catholic side, these independent congregations are the followers loyal to the Vatican. TSPM and CPA-related churches are government-controlled and even if there is no direct censorship, they carefully weigh their words. Election of leadership is state-influenced. TSPM and CPA have each published five-year-plans on how their churches will 'sinicize'. Churches are continuing to publish white papers from the leadership level on this topic, e.g. [Sinicization](#) in a Catholic context. This category is seriously affected by the intensification of control and Sinicization (also known as Sinification), as well as by the delayed or denied re-opening of churches after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since September 2018, the Holy See has been party to a '[Provisional Agreement](#)' with China on the appointment of Roman Catholic bishops, which was renewed for two years in 2020. However, no details have been made public. This has not led to any tangible relief of pressure on Catholic Christians. Before prolonging the agreement, it was reported that computers belonging to the Vatican and the Roman Catholic diocese of Hong Kong had been hacked, most likely by the Chinese authorities.

[Converts to Christianity](#)

Converts are either from a Muslim background or from a Buddhist (Tibetan) background. Living in ethnic minority regions where some elements strive for independence and which are becoming ever more volatile, converts are facing pressure from two sides;

the government, and family and community. The government restricts any meeting or action it deems political or dangerous. Meanwhile, family, friends and community put converts under pressure to return to the 'true faith', because it is an important uniting factor for the ethnic groups, especially when the Communist authorities are imposing an 'Ethnic Unity Law'.

Non-traditional Christian communities

This category is made up of a multitude of Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations under a whole variety of names. On the Protestant side, these (often unregistered) non-traditional churches are also called house churches or underground churches, sometimes also family churches. Unlike several years ago when congregations consisted of hundreds of members and in some provinces met openly in commercial buildings, most house churches (a ballpark estimate of 80%) have now returned to home gatherings. As a result of the pandemic and the 100th anniversary of the CCP, many churches have stopped in-person meetings and moved their services online. There have even been instances where online meetings via Zoom, etc., have stopped. Consequently, many house churches split up into small gatherings.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Communist and post-Communist oppression:

The main goal of the Communist Party is to maintain power through national unity and by limiting potential threats such as religious and ethnic minority groups. Christians are the largest social body not under complete state control and therefore seen as dangerous. According to [updated Communist Party rules](#), any member who maintains religious beliefs after a dose of 'strengthened thought education' will be 'encouraged to leave the Party'. Most officials will do everything to secure their position, regardless of whether they are personally convinced by Communist ideology. In many regions of China, Christian activities have been hindered. Although house churches are still targeted the most (especially if involved in youth work), government-controlled churches face restrictions too. Catholics loyal to the Vatican face significant oppression. Muslim and Tibetan leaders are sometimes co-opted by the Communist Party to act as Party officials and limit Christian activities.

Dictatorial paranoia:

President Xi Jinping has consolidated his power in a manner not seen since Mao Zedong, recently hinting that he will remain in position until [2035](#). Whether Xi Jinping stays on will most likely be decided on the 20th Party Congress in October 2022. In an effort to maintain control, the Communist Party and government authorities have carefully studied what led to the downfall of Communism elsewhere. One factor is the control of social groups such as Christians, who are seen as alien and connected with foreign, mainly Western, powers. The Party puts real pressure on officials to implement policies, and offers incentives.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Women lead many churches, especially house churches, so face the same risks of imprisonment as men. Generally speaking, converts from Muslim and Buddhist backgrounds face the greatest pressures. Their husbands may be pressurized to divorce them because they are seen as traitors to their ethnic group.

China's one-child policy is notorious for leaving a gender imbalance. The consequences of this policy interact with the vulnerability of Christian communities in neighboring countries. Female Christians from Pakistan and Myanmar may be trafficked into China as brides.

- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Forced marriage
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence - sexual

MEN

Male Christian leaders are targeted for government surveillance. Catholic priests and house church leaders have been abducted. "They are simply snatched away," a country expert explains, "only to appear months later in a kind of house arrest in a hotel, where they get re-educated." In these instances, men may be physically abused, including being beaten by police officers. While in detention, many men are traumatized. For those under prolonged detention, they are unable to provide financially for their families.

- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Incarceration by government
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Violence - physical

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution score out of 100
2022	17	75.66
2021	17	74.08
2020	23	69.65
2019	27	65.03
2018	43	57.48

The increase of 1.7 points in WWL 2022 shows a considerably deteriorated situation and reflects that the strong pressure on churches, even if government-affiliated, is felt nationwide. The violence score remained on the same level as last year, while the scores for pressure in the five spheres of life slightly increased. This suggests an ever stronger emphasis on Communist ideology. Citizens are being used to give information on Christians and other minorities. A pronounced increase of scores in the 'national life' sphere show very strict implementation of the regulations on religion.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- An 'underground' Catholic bishop Joseph Zhang Weizhu, of Xinxiang in Henan Province, was arrested together with 10 priests and an unknown number of theological students. The 10 priests and the theological students were released after two months, but Bishop Joseph Zhang is still unaccounted for.
- Officials raided an online service organized by Shenzhen Trinity Gospel Harvest Church, forcing the Pastor and elder to stop preaching.
- Churches with foreign ties have come under special scrutiny or have been closed. The Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church, with 60 members, fled to [Jeju Island](#) in South Korea and asked for asylum, but their application has been declined. The case is still pending.

WWL Year	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Christians forced to marry
2022	3000	100	10	10
2021	3088	10	10	10

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - see [here](#) for full results. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.

Private life

Access to online Christian content is possible (if not blocked) but strictly monitored by the government. Christians are already preparing for more restrictions and a good deal of self-censorship is practiced. The government increasingly blocks website content and limits the space of available content, e.g. by blocking Bible apps. There have been several reports from areas where the authorities have entered homes of Christians. Converts to Christianity with a Muslim or Buddhist background mostly keep their faith secret as they could be threatened by local authorities or even detained. Party and military members who convert to Christianity may also keep their conversion a secret. Children and youths are not supposed to be exposed to religion.

Family life

Children under 18 years are banned from attending religious activities and Christian students are forced to study anti-biblical teachings in the atheist school system. Children of Christians have been forced by authorities in several parts of the country to sign statements confirming they are 'not religious'. Children are put under pressure to reveal their parents' religion. The Party warns that religious activities are regarded as illegal behavior, which leaves many children confused and sometimes angry with their Christian parents. The introduction of the 'Children speak in unison' plan led [one observer to state](#) that the educational reforms 'aim to mold model citizens from pre-school'. In some areas, Christian children, especially those with convert parents, have been threatened with not being allowed to graduate or not being accepted for further studies.

Community life

Monitoring (e.g. by CCTV, neighborhood committees and security guards) is widespread, and high-profile Christians come under special scrutiny. The Communist Party [maintains a reward system](#) to encourage security guards in the community to report any irregularities. This grid management system is tight and used for several purposes, including monitoring neighborhoods.

Church leaders are often summoned for interrogation at local police stations, such as in the case of the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu. Employment discrimination is more common in public sector jobs (e.g. all religious believers are excluded from government positions which require Party membership). There are rare cases where the government has pressed private employers to terminate contracts with religious believers. Christian converts from Muslim or Buddhist backgrounds are put under pressure by family and community to return to their original faith and face discrimination until they do.

National life

China's Constitution recognizes freedom of religion but allows the state to define 'normal' religious activity. The best illustration of this in the WWL 2022 reporting period has been the [sentencing of four Christians](#), for between 15 months and six years, for the 'crime' of selling Bible players. There are many means of discriminating against religious minorities; denying permits, conducting financial investigations aimed at uncovering foreign links and shutting down churches due to alleged building or fire violations. Christians who depend on government subsidies (such as the elderly) are sometimes put under pressure by local Party officials to choose between their faith and the government subsidy. The text, entitled 'Opinions on Providing Judicial Services and Protection for Accelerating the Modernization of Agriculture and Rural Areas', [provides guidelines](#) under paragraph 9 for implementing the overall national security concept and for promoting harmony and stability in rural regions. Religious activities are listed among various other dangerous elements in society.

Church life

All communities of Christians are being monitored. Church activities are not just monitored by the presence of agents, but also by CCTV cameras watching the pulpit, congregation and surrounding church compound. Preaching at Sunday services must be pre-approved, but the situation varies.

Monitoring of unregistered churches has increased in this reporting period, with more house churches experiencing harassment and obstruction once their activities are discovered. Most house churches were forced to form small groups and gather in different locations, maintaining a low profile to avoid detection. As one country expert summarized: “Prior to COVID-19, the government had begun shutting down large unregistered congregations. During lockdown, no public meetings were allowed so believers continued meeting online. It is highly unlikely that unregistered groups will attempt to resume large in-person meetings. The future of small group meetings, which many are currently utilizing, is uncertain.” Many house churches switched to (limited) online meetings. Churches that are officially closed for good lose everything, including property and assets. This occurs more in rural areas. [New regulations](#) for religious institutions were made public in May 2021. Among other goals, Article 4, Article 9 and Article 39 are telling. They emphasize the cultivation of a reserve of patriotic religious talents. The regulations also mandate that courses should include a series of classes on ideological and political theory. Learning Xi Jinping’s Thought should be included as the institution’s goal. With this Sinicization campaign, pastors in registered churches are increasingly pressured to promote Party teaching in the churches. The Communist Party also introduced a new regulation concerning [religious clergy](#); Article 3 highlights that religious clergy should love the motherland, support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and adhere to the direction of the [Sinicization](#) of religion in China. If these regulations are enforced strictly, freedom for churches will shrink considerably.



International obligations & rights violated

China has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)*
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

**China has signed but not ratified the ICCPR.*

China is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christians are monitored by the state, their activities often hindered and disrupted (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Churches are hindered from obtaining legal status and those officially registered are subject to heavy state interference (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian leaders are imprisoned on charges of national security (ICCPR Art. 9)
- Children of Christians have been harassed and discriminated against because of their parents’ faith (CRC Art. 2)
- Christian children are hindered from attending religious services and receiving religious education (CRC Art. 14)

Situation of other religious minorities

Just as churches have been closed or destroyed, so have Muslim, Buddhist, Taoist, Jewish and other houses of worship. Religious minorities such as Muslims, Buddhists and adherents of Falun Gong report severe societal discrimination in employment, housing and business. Muslims in Xinjiang suffer severe human rights violations, with up to one million held in re-education camps which the government claims are necessary in the fight against radical Islam. Some have been released. Details of these camps have been revealed in reports such as the China Leaks, and satellite images show the scale of the camps. Tibetan Buddhists face strong pressure from the government, especially under the new Ethnic Unity Law. There is growing evidence of organ harvesting from religious minorities who were killed in labor camps.



Open Doors in China

Open Doors provides training and Christian literature to Christians who suffer persecution, intolerance and discrimination, including Muslim and Buddhist background Christians. We strive to support Christians in China through indigenous leaders.

About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2021 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- The full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology, as well as the complete WWL 2022 ranking and reports, can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
