

World
Watch
Research

Laos: Full Country Dossier

January 2024



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Contents

Introduction	3
World Watch List 2024	3
Copyright note	4
Sources and definitions	4
WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Laos	5
Brief country details	5
Map of country	5
Dominant persecution engines and drivers	6
Brief description of the persecution situation	6
Summary of international obligations and rights violations	7
Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period	7
External Links - Situation in brief	7
WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Laos	8
Links for general background information	8
Recent history	8
Political and legal landscape	9
Religious landscape	10
Economic landscape	12
Social and cultural landscape	14
Technological landscape	17
Security situation	18
Trends analysis	18

External Links - Keys to understanding	19
WWL 2024: Church information / Laos	21
Christian origins.....	21
Church spectrum today.....	22
Areas where Christians face most difficulties	22
Christian communities and how they are affected	22
External Links - Church information.....	23
WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Laos	24
Reporting period	24
Position on the World Watch List	24
Persecution engines	24
Drivers of persecution.....	26
The Persecution pattern.....	28
Pressure in the 5 spheres of life.....	28
Violence.....	35
5 Year trends	37
Gender-specific religious persecution / Female	39
Gender-specific religious persecution / Male	40
Persecution of other religious minorities.....	40
Future outlook.....	41
External Links - Persecution Dynamics.....	41
Further useful reports.....	42

Introduction

World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	11	-	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

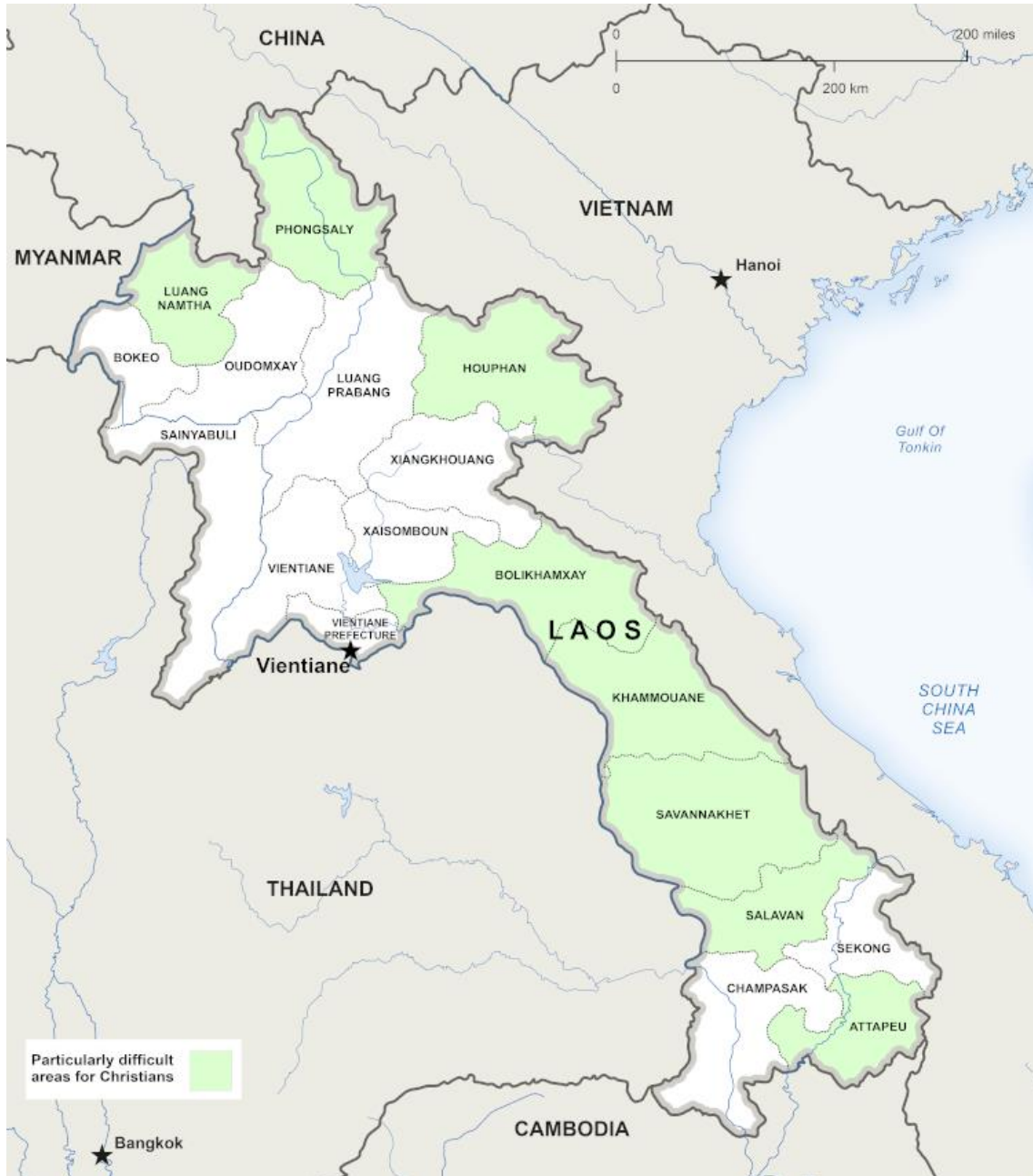
WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Laos

Brief country details

Laos: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
7,581,000	212,000	2.8

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Map of country



Laos: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	75	21
WWL 2023	68	31
WWL 2022	69	26
WWL 2021	71	22
WWL 2020	72	20

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Laos: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Government officials, Political parties, Ethnic group leaders
Clan oppression	Ethnic group leaders, One's own (extended) family, Non-Christian religious leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Government officials
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Political parties, Ethnic group leaders
Religious nationalism	Non-Christian religious leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family, Political parties

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

Christians in Laos were shocked by the highly exceptional killing of a pastor in October 2022, right at the beginning of the WWL 2024 reporting period (see below: *Specific examples of violations*). While they are no strangers to being treated violently, a killing is a very rare event. The usual levels of pressure faced are as follows: Communist authorities heavily monitor all religious activities, including those of the registered churches. As all gatherings have to be notified to the administration, house churches have to operate clandestinely as they are considered 'illegal gatherings'. Even an estimated 75% of all government-approved Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) congregations throughout the country do not have permanent church structures and consequently conduct worship services in homes. Converts to Christianity bear the brunt of rights violations. They are considered guilty of putting themselves outside the (Buddhist-animist) community and consequently face pressure and violence from their families (which, in a Laotian household, usually consist of three generations under one roof) and by the local authorities. Both will often stir up the local community or seek assistance from local religious leaders. This can lead to converts being expelled from their home village.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Laos 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)

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

- Christian communities and their activities are closely monitored by the authorities (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christians face discrimination in employment because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Christian children are forced to receive Buddhist religious education and to participate in religious ceremonies and festivals that are not in line with their religious beliefs (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- The state imposes strict limitations on Christian meetings that go beyond the internationally recognized and permitted limitations (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 21)
- Christians are attacked and expelled from their community for sharing about their faith (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

In the WWL 2024 reporting period, three further killings were reported, making a total of four. For security reasons, no details can be provided.

29 January 2023: In the south-central region of Laos, houses of a group of Christians were damaged by angry villagers because the Christians refused to give up their faith. A previous incident had occurred in November 2022. The Christians have since been expelled from the village. For security reasons, no further details can be provided.

3 January 2023 and **3 February 2023:** At least 15 Christians were arrested in Central and Southern Laos. For security reasons, no details can be provided.

23 October 2022: Pastor Sy Seng Manee was [killed](#) while travelling on a ministry trip. His body was found in a forest near a road to Donkeo village, Khammouane province (Radio Free Asia - RFA, 15 November 2022). Pastor Sy had been arrested by the authorities back in 2018 when he held weekly worship meetings in his house.

External Links - Situation in brief

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: killed - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/village-preacher-11152022161618.html>

WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Laos

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 Laos report	AI Laos 2022	https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-east-asia-and-the-pacific/laos/report-laos/	30 June 2023
BBC News Laos profile - updated 18 April 2023	BBC Laos profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15351898	30 June 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI Laos Report 2022	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/LAO	30 June 2023
CIA World Factbook Laos - updated 17 June 2023	World Factbook Laos	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/laos/	30 June 2023
Crisis24 Laos report (Garda World)	Crisis24 Laos report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/laos	30 June 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit Laos profile 2023	EIU Laos profile 2023	https://country.eiu.com/laos	30 June 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 Laos	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	30 June 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Laos not included	Democracy Index 2023	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 Laos	https://freedomhouse.org/country/laos/freedom-world/2023	30 June 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries, Laos not included	Freedom on the Net 2023	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores	
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 Laos profile	https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/lao-pdr/	30 June 2023
Girls Not Brides Laos report	Girls Not Brides Laos	https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/laos/	30 June 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023, Laos not included	HRW 2023	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023	
Internet World Stats available in 2023	IWS 2023 Laos	https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#la	30 June 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 Laos	https://rsf.org/en/country/laos	30 June 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2022 Laos	https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/laos	30 June 2023
UNDP: Human Development Report Laos	UNDP HDR Laos	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/LAO	30 June 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Laos	IRFR 2022 Laos	https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/laos/	30 June 2023
USCIRF 2023 – covering 17 CPC / 11 SWL, Laos not included	USCIRF 2023	https://www.uscirf.gov/countries	
World Bank Laos data – 2021	World Bank Laos data	https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&id=b450fd57tbar=ydd-yinf=nzm=n&country=LAO	30 June 2023
World Bank Laos overview – updated 10 April 2023	World Bank Laos overview	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lao/overview	30 June 2023
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook Laos - April 2023	Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 Laos	https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/c6aceb75bed03729ef4ff9404dd7f125-0500012021/related/mpo-lao.pdf	30 June 2023

Recent history

Laos was a French colony until 1953. A power struggle ensued until Communist forces overthrew the constitutional monarchy in 1975, heralding years of isolation. After the changes in the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s, Laos began opening up its economy from 1986 onwards. Despite economic reforms, called the "New Economic Mechanism", the country remains poor and heavily dependent on foreign aid.

Laos has slowly opened up to its neighbors and the international community. It hosted the SEA Games in 2009 and joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2013. The country continues to come down very harshly on any perceived dissent (which includes Christian faith, especially outside the state-approved churches). On the other hand, Laos desperately needs development and economic growth, and foreign investment will need increasing openness. This is one of the reasons why Laos has hosted several UN Special Rapporteurs and consultants, as well as others from ASEAN and the EU. According to the World Bank Laos overview, development is well under-

way and Laos has become one of the fastest growing economies in the East Asian and Pacific region, despite being heavily affected by COVID-19, as can be seen by the depreciation of its currency. However, this growth depends greatly on its big investor and neighbor, China, and comes at the cost of increasing dependency and an environmental toll (see below: *Economic / Social and cultural landscape*).

The central Communist authorities are not the main problem for Christians (although restrictions do get passed down from the central administration too), therefore it is not to be expected that having a new Prime Minister will have any effect on Christian life (see: *Political and legal landscape*). The difficulties Christians face come mainly from the local authorities and village leaders who are more concerned with guarding and preserving ethnic practices and keeping up the Communist management style and bureaucracy, as well as keeping the peace in the villages. The killing of a pastor in October 2022 and other subsequent killings came as a shock to the small Christian community and was a vivid reminder that a growing Christian church does not sit well with local authorities, especially in rural areas.

Political and legal landscape

The Communist Party does not plan any changes or even democratic reforms. There is little real hope that religious freedom as stipulated in the Lao Constitution will actually be observed and respected right down to village level. Being influenced by two larger neighbors which for several years now have been increasingly emphasizing Communist values (China and Vietnam), Laos is looking to them for examples of how to keep society in check.

The election of a [new Prime Minister](#), Sonexay Siphandone, in December 2022 will most likely bring only limited change, if any (RFA, 4 January 2023). In his inaugural speech, Siphandone, who has a military background, promised to "raise the spirit of the revolution to the highest level". This may translate into a stronger reliance on Communist ideology, but the government and the Communist Party have very concrete issues to tackle: Apart from rampant inflation and a high depreciation rate of the local currency (see below: Economic landscape), drug trafficking (see below: Social and cultural landscape) and human trafficking remain other big challenges and are politically sensitive matters. The fact that the authorities [rescued](#) hundreds of trafficked Laotian citizens, including women from the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (which is one of the major development projects set up with the help of China), illustrates the political challenges the government is having to face up to (UCA News, 23 December 2022). Laos is also a basis for the growing [illicit industry](#) of illegal gambling, cybercrime and money-laundering. This takes place in the border regions in particular, as well as elsewhere in Myanmar, Cambodia and Thailand (Pro Publica, 5 October 2023).

Local and provincial leaders in particular are slow to implement laws from the central government and supervision is weak. Although there seems to be some effort to improve the way of governing the people of Laos, the Communist Party prefers to stick to its traditional patterns of ruling, i.e., nepotism and corruption when it comes to the economy, and opaqueness and limitations as far as political and social matters are concerned. The authorities place high emphasis on controlling and even indoctrinating the population via the media (which cannot be called 'free' at all) and to [clamp down](#) on citizens voicing complaints or concerns on social media (UCA News, 1 March 2021). At the same time, in practice, village laws, frequently based on tra-

ditions and beliefs, trump all national laws (including the Constitution) and will usually dominate all legal and political considerations.

Since nearly half of the population belong to ethnic minorities, keeping a close watch on them is important to the government, especially as there had been skirmishes with the Hmong minority before. The ultimate control of the country and its people remains in the hands of the Communist government. There is no room for expressing different views or for staging demonstrations due to the government's draconian level of control in combination with local religious leaders.

Gender perspective

Lao laws are predominately gender-balanced, although effective implementation of laws is lacking. Despite the 1990 Family Law outlawing forced marriages and polygamy, forced marriages are prevalent under customary law, particularly among the [Hmong](#) ethnic group (The Laotian Times, 25 March 2022). In Hmong culture, polygamy is permitted for men (when the wife is unable to bear children); and it is permitted in Khmu culture if the couple do not have a boy. The Family Law further stipulates the legal minimum age of marriage as 18 but permits early marriages for children aged 15-18 in 'special and necessary cases' (Article 9). Laos has one of the highest child marriage rates in the region, with such marriages occurring most commonly in rural areas, and among Hmong, Mon-Khmer and Chinese-Tibetan ethnic groups. According to Girls Not Brides Laos, rates are high for both girls (33% are married by 18) and for boys alike (11% married by 18).

Religious landscape

Laos: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	212,000	2.8
Muslim	8,800	0.1
Hindu	5,900	0.1
Buddhist	4,099,000	54.1
Ethno-religionist	3,110,000	41.0
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	18,100	0.2
Atheist	22,200	0.3
Agnostic	63,300	0.8
Other	41,340	0.5
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

According to WCD estimates (accessed March 2023), 54.1% of the population are Buddhist, mainly following the Theravada teachings. Buddhism serves as a connecting hub for the whole of society and it is closely linked with nationalism. 41% adhere to ethnic religions (Chinese folk religion not included) related to their ethnic or tribal ancestry, and are similar to religions practiced in Thailand. Several folk traditions have been incorporated into Buddhism, so that the numbers given above should be understood as overlapping. Folk traditions for example venerate special places like rivers or trees, natural phenomena and include ancestral worship. Animistic practices like honoring the spirits or ancestor worship have a very strong influence in society, especially in rural areas, and serve as a source of pressure on Christians: People not taking part in animistic practices, exclude themselves from the community and will be taught what it means to be an outsider.

The country is still in the tight grip of the Communist Party and therefore religion is something the authorities generally see as hostile and in need of being controlled. While Buddhism is accepted as being part of the country's heritage to a certain extent and the animist religions are seen as ineradicable superstitions, Christianity is generally seen as being foreign, linked with Western values. and an enemy of Communism, especially in the villages. The government recognizes Christianity as one of the four official religions in Laos. Whereas at the national level, there is an increased cooperation between the government and the registered Lao Evangelical Church (LEC), such recognition is still lacking at village level, and even more so for Christians not under the LEC umbrella.

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Laos, page 13):

- “LEC leaders continued to say growth in church membership exacerbated tensions within some communities, particularly among villagers who were wary of minority religions. According to numerous sources, majority non-Christian neighbors often harassed new Christian members in these villages for abandoning their traditions, typically Buddhist or animist.”

The death of [longtime president](#) of the LEC, Reverend Dr. Kamphone Khountapanya, on 3 January 2022 (Christian Conference of Asia, 18 January 2022), left a gap hard to fill. The new leader is not as experienced and only time will tell how well he is able to navigate the balance between church needs and government demands.

Laos is one of the few Theravada Buddhist countries in the world, following the oldest existing Buddhist tradition. But how does this ancient faith system fit in with the national leadership's Communist ideology? There is a close connection between society and the influence of Buddhism, temples and monks. Buddhist temples are not just religious centers; they also serve as focal points for community life, especially in rural areas, and most Buddhist men spend some time of their lives in a temple – ranging from a few days to longer periods of time. It is expected from men to follow this tradition and it leads to a natural bond with Buddhism, monasteries and the authority of monks. Another reason why temples are so important for community life is that many provide free education.

Economic landscape

According to UNDP HDR Laos:

- **Gross National Income (2017 PPP USD):** 7.413 USD
- **Rate of multidimensional poverty:** The rate of multidimensional poverty stands at 9.6%, a further 21.2% are listed as being vulnerable to poverty. Measured by Laos' national poverty line, 23.4% of the population can be seen as poor.
- **Remittances:** Remittances make up 1.6% of the GDP.

According to World Bank Laos data:

- Laos is classified as a lower-middle income country.
- **GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international USD):** 7.948
- **GDP per capita growth rate:** 2.5% (2021)
- **Poverty gap at 6.85 USD a day:** (2017 PPP) 30% (last available data from 2018).

Despite the considerable economic growth of the country since the economic liberalization of 1986, when the Communist Party decentralized control on the economy and encouraged the start of private enterprises, Laos is still one of the least developed countries in the world. It had been on track to being promoted to a higher category in 2024, the United Nations ECOSOC [announced](#), (removing it from the category "Least Developing Countries") if Laos could continue its growth rate levels (RFA, 18 April 2018). Those efforts were thwarted by the arrival of the COVID-19 crisis, although Laos is less connected internationally than other countries. Laos now hopes to '[graduate](#)' to the next level by 2026 (UN Committee for Development Policy, 26 February 2021).

In its Laos overview, the World Bank gives insights into the economic challenges the country is facing:

- "Economic activity virtually stagnated in 2020, with GDP growing by only 0.5%. The second wave of the pandemic in 2021 dented hopes of a strong rebound, with a growth rate of just 2.7% estimated over 2022. The kip lost 68 percent of its value against the US dollar over the year to October, leading to temporary shortages of fuel and limited access to foreign exchange at the official exchange rate. The cumulative effects of these setbacks mean the country faces macroeconomic instability, heightened financial risks, and negative trends in state expenditure. As public debt service obligations rise and revenues decrease, spending on crucial social services such as education, health care, and social protection is down in real terms. By February 2023, inflation had surpassed 40% year-on-year. The Lao government is looking to adapt to the changing economic situation, but has limited fiscal space for manoeuvre. The prime minister has emphasized the need to stabilize the economy, especially by reining in inflation, and repaying debts accumulated by state-funded development projects and state enterprises."

In its [Lao Economic Monitor](#) (19 May 2023), the World Bank provides more details, also including how the numbers translate into challenges Lao households are facing:

- "While the Laos-China railway and new dry port have facilitated travel and trade flows, with industrial activity supported by natural resource exports, recovery has been undermined by macroeconomic instability and external factors. The need to service large external debts, together with high import prices and limited foreign exchange, contributed to a sharp fall in the value of the kip. This caused high inflation, in turn weakening income, consumption, and investment. For many households, real income is falling and spending on health and education is declining."
- "Driven by persistent external imbalances, the kip depreciated sharply in 2022 and fell by 32 and 43 percent against the Thai baht and US dollar respectively in the year to April 2023. The exchange rate has recently stabilized, supported by tighter monetary policy. However, limited exchange liquidity and low reserves have resulted in foreign exchange rationing by commercial banks, driving the parallel exchange market."
- "The depreciation of the kip and rising global prices have resulted in high inflation, which stood at 40 percent in the year to April 2023. Increased global commodity prices, particularly for fuel and fertilizer, have led to rising costs for raw materials and locally produced goods. Food price inflation reached 52 percent year-on-year, severely affecting urban poor households."
- "Real household incomes have suffered from rampant inflation. While the share of households reporting income losses fell from May to December 2022, nearly two-thirds of workers saw their income stagnate or decline amid rising living costs. By the end of 2022, 64 percent of Lao families were living on the same or a lower budget than a year earlier."

Additionally, in all the economic and social development achieved so far, there remains an enormous gap between urban and rural areas, the latter being the least developed particularly in terms of infrastructure (including electricity, water, sanitation, etc.). As the income gap grows, so does the potential for social unrest. Due to rampant corruption and cronyism (i.e. partiality to long-standing friends), only the country's leadership benefits from economic gains and most citizens are left in poverty, bad health conditions and with a growing inflation rate. All this is reflected in the poverty statistics as well as in the numbers for vulnerable employment and malnourished children (see below: *Social and cultural landscape*). Although a far-reaching anti-corruption campaign has had some positive results, but did not eradicate the deeply rooted networks.

Despite progress in developing infrastructure, the majority of Laotians still work in the agricultural sector; the CIA Factbook estimated that in 2012 more than 73% of all workers were employed in this sector, the UNDP estimates a still high 62.4%. Although this rate may be decreasing, it still shows that it is no exaggeration to call Laos a rural society. Many Christians are living in the rural areas as well and therefore share the challenges of poverty and malnourishment.

Additionally, the country may find itself in a catch-22 situation in the foreseeable future: By cooperating with China, foreign investment is available without opening up the economy to market forces; but the price is a growing dependence on China. According to estimates, the

country's '[sovereign debt](#)' to China makes up 29.4% of the total GDP. But there is also a further hidden debt exposure of 35.4% of the GDP, making it "a class of its own" (Malik, A., Parks, B., et. al. (2021). *Banking on the Belt and Road: Insights from a new global dataset of 13,427 Chinese development projects*, September 2021). Even though this huge amount of debt is not only due to Chinese investment, Laos seems to be on the brink of sovereign [bankruptcy](#), according to observers (The Diplomat, 28 June 2022). The Lao kip was seen as the [third weakest](#) currency worldwide in 2023, behind the Iranian rial and the Vietnamese dong (Forbes, 12 June 2023).

An ECOSOC upgrade does not mean anything for the question of human rights, for minorities and for freedom of religion. Questions will be increasingly asked about who exactly is benefitting from projects like building dams, especially as some 288 dams are planned. If all - or even just most - of the dams are completed, this may [jeopardize](#) the food and water security of more than 70 million people in several different countries (ASEAN Today, 13 August 2020). The railway between Laos and China, a part of the latter's Belt and Road Initiative, was completed in December 2020, despite the COVID-19 crisis, and was opened on 3 December 2021. It has the [potential](#) to be a gamechanger for Laos' economy, but only if it is accompanied by further efforts to improve hampering legislation and cut red tape, not as a stand-alone investment (ISEAS, 158/2021, 30 November 2021). In another sign of its growing dependency on China, Electricité du Laos, the country's largest power grid operator, granted a [25-year concession](#) to a Chinese company for managing its power grid (RFA, 16 March 2021). Villagers are often not properly compensated in [resettlement](#) measures and lack proper land and water resources (UCA News, 1 October 2021).

If the ties with China are drawn tighter, Christians will be significantly affected since China is not so concerned about a country's human rights record as other nations are and even sponsors a different understanding of human rights. Laos is trying to diversify its foreign investment and has had some success; for example, South Korea is another large [foreign investor](#) (ASEAN Today, 7 December 2018). However, it often seems that these investments go hand in hand with corruption and cronyism and so the majority of the population does not see anything of the promised growth and wealth.

Gender perspective

Women are, in general, more economically vulnerable than men. Looking at [UNDP's Gender Equality goal](#), it is clear that gender inequalities persist in relation to access to the labor market. Additionally, sexual violence, exploitation, and the unequal burden of domestic work all hinder women from attaining positions in public office. Whilst Laos boasts a relatively high proportion of [women in parliament](#) (22%), female representation is currently the lowest it has been since 2002 (World Bank Laos data).

Social and cultural landscape

According to World Factbook Laos and UNDP HDR Laos:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Lao 53.2%, Khmu 11%, Hmong 9.2%, Phouthay 3.4%, Tai 3.1%, Makong 2.5%, Katong 2.2%, Lue 2%, Akha 1.8%, other 11.6% (2015 est.)
- **Main languages:** Lao (official), French, English, various ethnic languages
- **Urbanization rate:** 38.2%

- **Literacy rate:** 87.1% (age 15 and above, 2021)
- **Mean years of schooling:** 5.3 years. Data from [UNESCO's](#) country profile (accessed 8 June 2023) highlights a small gender gap in relation to primary and secondary education in favor of boys. This gender gap is closing however, and Laos has made [significant progress](#) over the past decades such that most regions have achieved gender parity (WEF, July 2022, pp. 222-223).
- **Health and education indicators:** The pupil-teacher ratio in primary school is 22:1. Statistically, 3.7 physicians are available per 10,000 people and 15 hospital beds.

According to World Bank Laos data:

- **Population age:** 31% of all people are below the age of 14; 4.5% are above the age of 65 (2022).
- **Education:** The primary school completion rate is 89% (2020).
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 1.3% (2021), the rate for vulnerable employment is 78% (2021)
- **Refugees/IDPs:** According to the UN's [IOM](#) (accessed 7 July 2022), 1.3 million Laotians have migrated from their country. Laos serves much less as a transit and destination country. From Laos, the main migration destination is neighboring [Thailand](#), receiving 280,000 regular working migrants and many more irregular (IOM Flow Monitoring Report, December 2022).
- **Malnutrition:** Malnutrition still affects 33% of all children below five years of age, causing stunted growth. It causes 50% of all child deaths under 5 years of age, according to [UNICEF](#) (Laos country profile/Nutrition).

According to UNDP HDR Laos:

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a score of 0.613, Laos ranks 137th of 189 countries in the world. The HDI is still improving, growth even accelerated in 2019.
- **Life expectancy:** 67.9 years
- **Median age:** 24.4 years
- **Gender inequality:** With a score of 0.459, Laos ranks 113rd of 162 countries in the Gender Inequality Index.
- **Unemployment:** 6.8% of youth (between 15 and 24) are neither in school nor employment. The child labor rate (between 5 and 17) is 28.2%

Traditional Lao culture is based on Buddhism and perceives it as natural that wealth and power are concentrated in the hands of the ruling elite by virtue of their 'karma'. This karma determines their birth and social status. The means to improve your own status is to build up a network based on obligation and loyalty, given in exchange for protection and assistance in times of need. Given these underlying social values, there is little possibility for improvement in undeveloped regions or even of an open protest; after all, what happens is determined by one's karma and has to be accepted.

Poverty is still a considerable factor in Laos and according to the World Bank report quoted under "Economic landscape", a growing number of households struggles to make ends meet and have to live on the same or a lower budget than the year before. One important area where

poverty plays out is child labor. Apart from the high rate of child labor mentioned above, in the period between 2015 and 2019, 23.2% of all primary and secondary education age children were [out of school](#) (RFA, 2 June 2021). Most of these children come from rural communities and are working in the [agricultural sector](#), supporting their families who often do not understand the importance of schooling (UCA News, 14 June 2021).

Additionally, it remains a challenge to translate infrastructure projects like dams or the recently inaugurated highspeed trainline built by China into benefits for the lives of ordinary people. Although the recent transfer of power in January 2021 bolstered forces standing against corruption, this remains an uphill battle and as there is no free press in the country, there is no public pressure pushing for accountability or decisive action against corruption. There has also been a major reminder that Laos is part of the "Golden triangle" of drug production and trade in Southeast Asia: In the [biggest ever drug-busting operation in Asia](#), Lao authorities seized 55 million tablets of methamphetamine and 1.5 tons of crystal methamphetamine on 27 October 2021 (Reuters, 28 October 2021). 2022 saw a continuation of this trend, with more than 58 million tablets methamphetamine and more than a ton of crystal meth seized in locations in northern Laos close to the border with Myanmar ([UNODC](#), "Synthetic drugs in East and Southeast Asia - Latest developments and challenges", 2022). With COVID-19 restrictions lifted, drug production and trade in Southeast Asia are once again [thriving](#) (CNN, 2 June 2023). Therefore, Laos remains a hotspot for drug production and trafficking.

Gender perspective

Despite a [legal framework](#) that protects individuals from domestic violence and a relatively [low rate](#) of intimate partner violence (compared to the region), there is widespread social acceptance of gender-based violence, especially in the context of [indigenous women](#) where it is said to be underreported (UN Women, 2022; IWGIA, 1 April 2022). According to [Georgetown's 2019/2020 Women, Peace and Security Index](#), nearly three in five women agree that violence is justified against women who do not adhere to cultural expectations, and 80% of female victims choose not to report instances of abuse (GIWPS, 2019, p. 45). The COVID-19 pandemic also had a detrimental impact on the physical and social wellbeing of women and girls. In September 2020 a representative of UNICEF, Dr Pia Rebello Britto, reported: "The loss of employment, lack of access to information, healthcare and social services have heightened the risks for them to become victims of violence, exploitation, neglect, abuse and trafficking" ([UNICEF, 11 September 2020](#)). As highlighted in a report published by the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), Christian women who belong to ethnic minority groups and those residing in rural areas are most likely to experience neglect, discrimination and marginalization ([UNPO, April 2021](#)). This is perpetuated by both the communities in which they live, as well as by state forces.

Some of the biggest threats to the safety of both Christian men and women in Laos, albeit impersonal, are residues of [unexploded explosive ordinances](#) (UXOs) still scattered across Laos – an estimated 30% of more than 270 million cluster bombs dropped on Laos during the Second Indochina War (1954-1975, a.k.a. the Vietnam War) failed to detonate and only about 1% has been removed so far, with approximately 1,600km² of land still unsafe (Insider, April 2022). About 31 UXO accidents were [recorded](#) in 2021 which resulted in 11 fatalities and 44 injuries,

partly exacerbated by the suspension of field operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic (News.cn, 9 December 2021). Open Doors research suggests that some of the highly [contaminated zones](#) (CBS News, 5 September 2016) coincide with the regions where Christians also face high levels of persecution (see above: *Map of country*). Current estimates suggest it would take another 100 years for these areas to be made completely UXO-free ([The Guardian, 27 April 2023](#)).

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2023 Laos):

- **Internet usage:** 57.5% penetration - survey date: July 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 57.5% penetration – survey date: July 2022

According to World Bank Laos data:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 56 per 100 people

All data supplied should be treated with caution, as Laos is still a somewhat secretive country and all Internet and mobile phone usage has to be seen against the background of a closing (but still existing) urban-rural gap (consequently, UNDP's HDI Internet usage figure (25.5%) is almost half that of IWS. Although the capital of Laos,

Vientiane, is relatively small compared to other Asian cities, people from the rural areas are flocking to the city in search of employment and a better life. This has increased since Laos became a stopover point for the international highspeed trainline. Infrastructure in the capital is more advanced; rural areas sometimes have no Internet or mobile phone coverage, despite the access rate to electricity being more than 97% even in rural areas.

In July 2019, Laos announced a new law against what it perceives as "fake news", according to which all private online news websites, an important information source for an increasing number of Laotians, have to be [registered](#) (RFA, 19 July 2019). Due to such tough restrictions, many Laotians rely on [news](#) from neighboring Thailand and social media, despite the risks and limitations (RFA, 13 August 2020). The government of Laos ordered the registration or re-registration of all [SIM cards](#) for cell phones in July 2020, a policy it extended due to COVID-19 until January 2022 (Laotian Times, 30 September 2021). Unregistered SIM cards started to be [disconnected](#) as of December 2020 (Laotian Times, 3 December 2020).

Laos is not listed in Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report, due to a lack of data. However, the President's appeal to [report](#) police abuse except via Facebook (RFA, 12 April 2021), shows how much the Communist Party wants social media to be avoided.

Gender perspective

According to the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (GIWPS 2021 Laos), women's cell phone use in Laos rose from 60.4% in 2017 to 99.8% in 2021. This development indicates that - like men - women are likely to have good access to digital Christian resources and online Christian communities. However, ease of access may vary between rural and urban regions, based on the degree of freedom within individual households (e.g., for Christian con-

verts living under the strict supervision of family members).

Security situation

Since the struggle for Hmong independence ended in 2007, when the leader of an ethnic insurgency group was arrested, Laos has not faced any particular security challenges, although occasional skirmishes take place. However, the country watches carefully Vietnam's policy of [cracking down](#) on the Hmong - many of whom are Christian (UNPO, 18 April 2019). It remains to be seen if the June 2023 attack in Vietnamese Dak Lak province and the following crackdown on alleged "terrorists" (see: WWL 2024 Full Country Dossier Vietnam) will have any repercussions for the government's policy. The Hmong minority in Laos is over 9% of the country's population. Christians often face [harassment](#) and restrictions, but this is not due to any specific security issues (RFA, 7 May 2020).

Trends analysis

1) Strengthened ideology, strengthened Dictatorial paranoia

On 29 April 2023, outspoken Lao activist and dissident Anousa "Jack" Luangsuphom was [shot](#) at a café in the capital Vientiane (BBC News, 4 May 2023). He had been reported dead for security reasons, but survived and recovered in a hospital in Thailand. Mr Luangsuphom is known for his activism in the areas of mental health and human rights, such as freedom of expression. He is also the co-founder of a Facebook group named "Empowered by a Keyboard". Another activist's comment on his case sums up the [dangers](#) that many dissidents find themselves in: "Don't criticize the government, unless you want to disappear" (Southeast Asia Globe, 4 May 2023). This shooting happened shortly after the 10th anniversary of the [disappearance](#) of Sombath Somphone, a prominent development worker and human rights activist, as the United Nations characterized him (OHCHR, 13 December 2022). Even though it has to be emphasized that violence against Christians by national authorities is rare, there is a risk that a strengthened emphasis on ideology and *Dictatorial paranoia* will encourage local authorities to act more aggressively against Christians, as they can be easily portrayed as being outsiders and connected to foreign ideologies.

2) Growing dependency on China

Laos has made itself very dependent on loans and aid received from its big neighbor China and is in fact the country with the highest debt-per-GDP ratio to China in the world. This comes with high potential for China to exert soft or hard pressure on its small neighbor for following certain policies, but also has much more immediate environmental and social consequences, as the example of the [Mekong](#) shows, with millions of people in several countries depending on its water for irrigation (Channel News Asia, 17 April 2021). However, it is not just about China building dams in the country, other countries are also involved. There are also extensive plantations run by foreign companies (many of which are Chinese) for exporting fruit. Such projects do not usually take into account more long-term costs.

Without singling out a particular country, the World Bank sums up the situation in its 2023 [Lao Economic Monitor](#) (see above: *Economic landscape*):

- "Public and publicly guaranteed debt has reached critical levels, undermining macroeconomic stability and development prospects. Laos faces both solvency and liquidity challenges, with debt estimated at over 110 percent of GDP in 2022. The energy sector accounted for about 37 percent of debt stock in 2021. China holds about half of the external public debt stock and the repayments scheduled for 2023–26. As the ratio of debt service payments to domestic revenue increased from 35 to 61 percent between 2017 and 2022, public spending on education and health declined from 4.2 percent of GDP to an estimated 2.6 percent in the same period."

In the prevailing economic situation, Laos seems unable to see any other option but to rely even more heavily on China; it could even be argued that by leasing the power grid for 25 years, China has been handed a "kill switch" (or at least [critical infrastructure](#), CCP Watch, 14 January 2021). This dependency on China means that the country is unlikely to be encouraged to pay much attention to freedom of religion issues or the situation of religious minorities. Both Chinese and Laotian leaders are following a policy of increasingly emphasizing Communist ideology. Christians can feel this in everyday life, too, and might see more of it as China's influence grows.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Political and legal landscape: new Prime Minister - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/laosnewpminflation-01042023173705.html>
- Political and legal landscape: rescued - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/hundreds-of-trafficking-victims-rescued-from-laos/99821>
- Political and legal landscape: illicit industry - <https://www.propublica.org/article/casinos-cambodia-myanmar-laos-southeast-asia-fraud-cybercrime>
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- Political and legal landscape: Hmong - <https://laotiantimes.com/2022/03/25/bride-capture-custom-under-scrutiny-in-vietnam/>
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- Economic landscape: announced - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/lao-04182018152511.html>
- Economic landscape: graduate - <https://www.un.int/lao/news/lao-pdr-recommended-graduate-2026-least-developed-country-category-extended-preparatory-period>
- Economic landscape: Lao Economic Monitor - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lao/publication/lao-economic-monitor-may-2023-addressing-economic-uncertainty-key-findings>
- Economic landscape: sovereign debt - https://docs.aiddata.org/ad4/pdfs/Banking_on_the_Belt_and_Road__Insights_from_a_new_global_dataset_of_13427_Chinese_development_projects.pdf
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- Economic landscape: 25-year concession - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/grid-03162021152622.html>
- Economic landscape: resettlement - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/lao-villagers-still-disenfranchised-three-years-after-eviction/94358>
- Economic landscape: foreign investor - <http://www.aseantoday.com/2018/12/as-laos-sees-growing-investment-from-south-korea-local-communities-are-left-behind/>
- Economic landscape: UNDP's Gender Equality goal - <https://www.undp.org/laopdr/projects/strategic-support-achieve-sdg5-lao-pdr>
- Economic landscape: women in parliament - <https://data.worldbank.org/country/lao-pdr>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNESCO's - <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/la>
- Social and cultural landscape: significant progress - <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2022/>
- Social and cultural landscape: IOM - https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/iom_lao_pdr_overview.pdf
- Social and cultural landscape: Thailand - https://laopdr.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1906/files/press_release/file/Flow%20Monitoring%20Report%2022.pdf
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- Technological landscape: report - <https://engtest.rfaweb.org/english/news/laos/president-04122021153932.html>
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- Trends analysis: disappearance - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/12/lao-government-must-shed-light-whereabouts-activist-sombath-somphone-un>
- Trends analysis: Mekong - <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/climatechange/mekong-low-water-level-sediment-nakhon-phanom-golf-14606940>
- Trends analysis: Lao Economic Monitor - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lao/publication/lao-economic-monitor-may-2023-addressing-economic-uncertainty-key-findings>
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WWL 2024: Church information / Laos

Christian origins

Roman Catholic missionaries (Jesuits from Vietnam) made several attempts to enter Laotian territory from 1630 onwards. However, not until the Paris Foreign Mission Society entered the country in 1878, could a [mission station](#) be established at Ban Dorn Don on an island in the Mekong River (UCA News, Apostolic Vicariate of Pakse, accessed 9 December 2020).

[Presbyterian Christians](#) established churches in Thailand (Siam) in the 1860s and Swedish and Swiss missionaries moved eastwards into Laos in 1890 and 1902 respectively. However, Protestantism did not spread until the Christian and Missionary Alliance entered Laos in 1948. The Khmer minority, dominated by the Lao majority, then began to respond positively as did other minority groups (LEC History, accessed 9 December 2020).

As outlined in an article by the [Christian Forum in Asia](#) (18 January 2022): "The formation of the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) was actually an outcome of the missionary work of Swedish Protestant (1890), Swiss Brethren (1902), and Christian and Missionary Alliance missionaries (1928). The early days of the Swiss Mission training in southern Laos involved evangelism. The Brethren missionaries from Switzerland gave their first annual "cours biblique" (Bible course) for Christians in Song Khone, Savannakhet Province in 1911. The missionaries who worked in three different parts of the country came together and adopted a constitution to establish the Lao Evangelical Church in 1956. The newly formed church was granted corporate status by the Royal Lao Government in 1960."

In the mid-1970s, the Communist regime started a campaign to eradicate the Christian minority - but failed.

Church spectrum today

Laos: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	48,400	22.8
Protestant	162,000	76.4
Independent	1,600	0.8
Unaffiliated	100	0.0
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	212,100	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	154,000	72.6
Renewalist movement	19,200	9.1

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

Major denominations are the Roman Catholic Church, Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) and the Seventh Day Adventists. Many other churches are active, for instance, Evangelical, Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist, Lutheran and Assemblies of God.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Provinces like Luang Namtha, Phongsaly and Houphan in the north (where the Hmong minority is also concentrated), Khammouane and Bolikhamxay in the central part and Salavan and Attapeu in the south have traditionally been difficult places for Christians (see above: Map of country). Khammouane even witnessed the killing of a pastor, the first killing of a Christian for his faith for a long time. The local authorities and communities in these areas still seem very determined to silence Christian witness.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians

Such communities do not mix with local churches, except in rare cases in an urban setting, because doing so may have severe consequences for them and especially for the local church. They include communities of diplomatic staff and are facing pressure, for example, through the police monitoring system.

Historical Christian communities

These are communities such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) and the Seventh Day Adventists: Although these churches are officially recognized by the authorities, they are monitored and - in the case of the LEC - face restrictions in choosing their own leaders and printing Christian materials. The government has reportedly forced historical churches to monitor local non-registered churches, but the extent of this is unknown and it seems to be declining.

Converts to Christianity

Converts come from a Buddhist or Ethnic-animist background and are facing the strongest levels of pressure and violence of all categories of Christian communities. They are targeted by the local authorities and by families, friends and neighbors as they are seen as disturbing and destroying the social fabric. Since every conversion is an indication that Christianity is growing, the government - again more at the local level - will act harshly where there are reports of conversions. This is even more so, when a Christian presence is established in a village which did not have such a presence before.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations, Methodists, Mennonites, Lutherans, Assemblies of God and many other denominations exist in Laos. As the government does not allow "illegal" gatherings, all these groups need to register under one of the three government-recognized churches mentioned above, which normally makes life a good deal easier for them. Congregations that do not register, have to meet clandestinely. Members of those churches also face discrimination at various levels of society. Some of the aforementioned denominations have tried to register, but in vain. One country expert noted: "They are normally not harassed unless they start to grow in new areas." However, any form of missionary activity or the setting up of churches where there were previously none, is more than likely to trigger persecution.

External Links - Church information

- Christian origins: mission station - <https://www.ucanews.com/directory/dioceses/laos-pakse/375>
- Christian origins: Presbyterian Christians - <https://laoevangelicalchurch.com/lec-history/>
- Christian origins: Christian Forum in Asia - <https://www.cca.org.hk/news-and-events/homage-to-the-charismatic-church-and-ecumenical-leader-in-lao-pdr-the-rev-dr-khamphone-kounthapanya/>

WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Laos

Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

Position on the World Watch List

Laos: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	75	21
WWL 2023	68	31
WWL 2022	69	26
WWL 2021	71	22
WWL 2020	72	20

The score for Laos increased by an unprecedented 6.6 points from 68 points in WWL 2023 to 75 points in WWL 2024, almost exclusively owing to an increase in violent incidents, causing the violence score to more than double. For the Christian community of Laos, the most pronounced and shocking violence has been the cases of killings, the most prominent among them the killing of a pastor in October 2022. Apart from that, more incidents of churches being closed down and Christians being attacked and detained were reported in the WWL 2024 reported period. Meanwhile the level of pressure exerted on Christians by (mainly local) state authorities, and the very strong pressure on converts from family, friends, neighbors and the local authorities did not ease up. Where the church is growing, especially where new churches have been established in rural areas, pressure and even violence are almost certain to follow, again, mainly from actors at the local level. By putting very high pressure on Christians, Laos follows the example set by other countries still ruled by Communist parties - especially its big neighbor, China.

Persecution engines

Laos: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Not at all
Religious nationalism	RN	Medium
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Very strong
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Very strong

Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Communist and post-Communist oppression (Very strong), blended with Dictatorial paranoia (Strong)

Laos is one of the five remaining Marxist-Leninist countries in the world; it staunchly sticks to Communist ideology and as such is strictly opposed to any influence deemed foreign or Western. In order to keep control, the Communist Party puts enormous pressure on society, including the small Christian minority. Per Communist definition, state authorities have a negative view of Christians, but Christianity is nevertheless recognized as one of the four official religions, although it is seen as a Western ideology that challenges Communism. Despite all training to the contrary (See below: *Persecution pattern*), *Communist oppression* still occurs, especially at the provincial and district levels. One country expert observed that the Communist Party at a national level deliberately slows the growth of the Christian Church by turning a blind eye to the persecution of Christians at a local level.

The Lao government controls all information, including newspapers and radio. The state pressure, apart from being monitored, is most strongly felt at the provincial and village level of leadership. The Communist Party - rather than a single ruling politician - will however do everything necessary to stay in power. Christians therefore should stay within tacitly understood guidelines and there are limits not to be crossed if Christians want to avoid negative reactions from officials. Local authorities often make use of society's hostile attitude towards Christians (most pronounced when there are visible signs of growth) to justify acting against them.

Clan oppression (Very strong)

Animism and other tribal practices are observed in tribal villages, especially in rural areas (which make up at least 60% of the country's territory). Abandoning tribal practices for Christian faith is seen as betrayal, since Christians are seen as destroying the unity of the village. Village leaders and family members in some areas see it necessary to expel Christians from their communities because of their fear that this foreign faith will anger the guardian spirits. This occurs, for instance, when Christians want to bury their dead in the local village cemetery. Local officials are also known to force Christians to renounce their faith and village leaders sometimes summon the local authorities to arrest Christians, although the authorities may be less driven by preserving age-old norms and values and more by 'keeping the peace' in the village.

Religious nationalism (Medium)

Theravada Buddhism is practiced by 66% of the population and is fundamental to the Lao culture. As one country expert explained: "Buddhism is the glue that binds the numerous ethnic groups and inaccessible villages scattered through the mountainous countryside." At the same time, he added: "Animistic practices and fear of the spirits are also part of the Buddhist culture

in the country" (see above: *Clan oppression*).

Drivers of persecution

Laos: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
		MEDIUM		VERY STRONG		VERY STRONG		STRONG	
Government officials		Weak		Medium		Strong		Strong	
Ethnic group leaders		Weak		Very strong		Medium		Medium	
Non-Christian religious leaders		Medium		Strong		Weak		Weak	
Religious leaders of other churches						Very weak		Very weak	
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs		Medium		Medium		Weak		Weak	
One's own (extended) family		Medium		Very strong		Weak		Weak	
Political parties		Medium		Very weak		Strong		Strong	

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Communist and post-Communist oppression, blended with Dictatorial paranoia

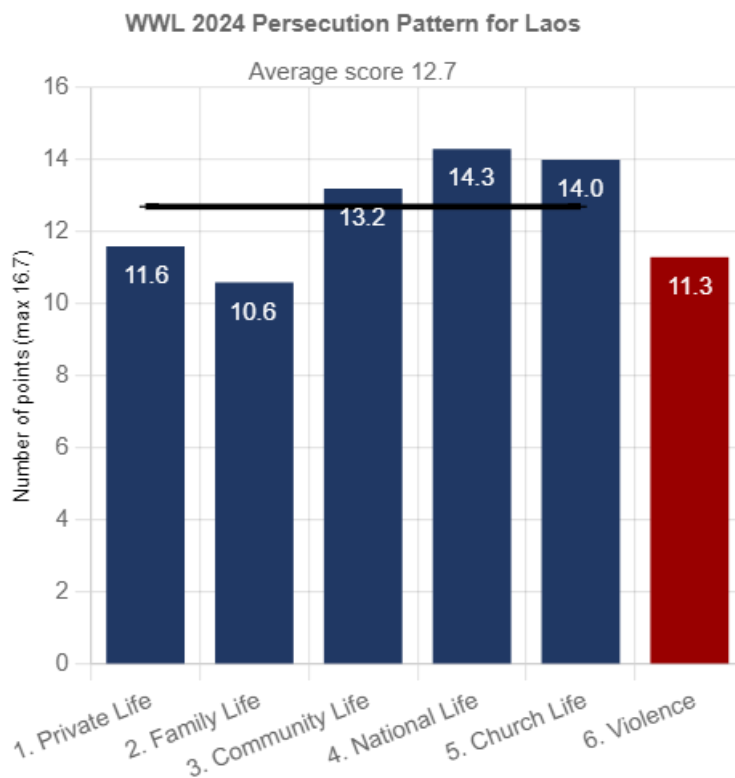
- **Government officials (Strong):** The rights of Christians are regularly violated by the Communist government authorities - most often at the provincial and local levels - as the Christian faith is seen as disturbing the communal peace in a village. The main motive under this driver is to keep absolute control. As one country expert says: "While religious persecution often begins with local disagreements, government officials are quick to blame Christians for causing disunity in society and slow to intervene to stop local villagers from persecuting local Christians."
- **Political parties (Strong):** Members of the Communist Party, the LPRP, again especially at the local level, see Christians as going against the Communist doctrine that religion is opium for the people and see Christianity in particular as being connected with the West. They therefore oppose Christians.
- **Ethnic group and Non-Christian religious leaders (Medium and Weak):** At least on paper, these leaders heed Communist doctrine, so when they put pressure on Christians, the authorities are not likely to stop them, especially when their ultimate goal is to preserve peace in the village. Occasionally, Buddhist monks have spoken out against Christians, but their role is nowhere near as significant as that of many of their peers in Myanmar or Sri Lanka.

- **Religious leaders of other churches (Weak):** The role of the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) is a mixed one. On the one side, it is helping non-traditional Christian churches by providing an umbrella and even negotiating with authorities when (members of) these churches run into problems. On the other hand, there are still reports (though decreasing in number) indicating that LEC staff are monitoring independent churches, even though the main reason may be to check for false teaching.

Drivers of Clan oppression and Religious nationalism

- **Extended family (Very strong):** Converts to Christianity experience persecution from their own family on a very frequent basis. The decision to stop following customary animistic rites has far-reaching consequences and puts converts outside a closely-knit society, especially as Laos is predominantly rural and the culture is one of honor and shame. Family members are also known to cooperate with other drivers, e.g. village chiefs, to bring converts back to their old beliefs. Converts are put under pressure by their village communities as well.
- **Ethnic group leaders and Non-Christian religious leaders (Very strong and Strong):** Often, persecution against converts is stirred up by local ethnic group leaders and religious leaders. This has occurred in a number of incidents in collusion with village chiefs, who have the role of protecting the tribe's norms and traditions. Christians are seen as disturbing the peace in the village and as endangering the whole community. Consequently, they are put under pressure to give up their 'foreign' faith and, if this strategy does not succeed, they can be expelled from the village. This is done to preserve their tribal culture and ultimately their authority in their tribe.
- **Normal citizens (Medium):** A convert's decision not to venerate the spirits anymore affects the whole community; it is believed that the spirits may get angry with everyone in the local population. For this reason, especially in rural areas, ordinary citizens will watch Christians with suspicion and sometimes even drive them out of their villages.
- **Government officials (Medium):** Government officials at the local level are often complicit in community action against Christians by remaining silent or by supporting the action, sometimes even despite higher orders to the contrary. This may be due to personal motives or to efforts of keeping the peace in a community.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for Laos shows:

- The average pressure on Christians over all *Spheres of life* remained unchanged with 12.7 points, as in WWL 2023.
- Pressure is strongest in the *National and Church spheres* (both at an extreme level), *closely* followed by the *Community sphere* (at a very high level). Pressure on converts is especially acute in the *Private and Community spheres*, whereas all Christians face strong pressure in the *National and Church spheres*. The pressure in the two latter spheres has decreased since the central government has been carrying out a training program for officials serving local authorities on how to guarantee freedom of religion and belief. Although more consequences on the ground need to be seen, this program has already had some positive effect.
- The violence score more than doubled to 11.3 points in WWL 2024. This is mainly due to the reported four killings, among them a well-known pastor. This number of killings is unprecedented and illustrates that persecution in Laos can turn very violent beyond expelling Christians from a village, especially when churches are growing and/or are established in new areas.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2024 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.75 points)

All discussions can be interpreted as attempts at (forced) conversion, which is illegal in Laos. Christians, especially in the villages, are therefore very reluctant to share their faith even with non-Christian family members. There have been many cases in the WWL 2024 reporting period where Christians have been expelled from their villages because of speaking about their faith. In other places, Christians were warned by the police to stop mentioning their faith in conversations or were ostracized by their communities. In one place, Christians reported that they had been fined for sharing their Christian faith with others. That is why most of the time Christians will be cautious about how and with whom they discuss their faith.

Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.25 points)

Converts, who come mostly from an animist background, almost always experience strong opposition from their families and village upon their conversion. They are mocked for following a 'foreign' belief. They face being disowned and can be told to leave their village. Family and community are often afraid that a convert is angering the spirits, but opposition often comes additionally from the local authorities, sometimes with support of the police, who have an interest in keeping peace in the village. Sometimes converts go to the provincial capitals where they still face opposition, but avoid the immediate family pressure.

Block 1.7: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members. (3.25 points)

Although it depends on the individual family and sometimes even on the individual family members, in general, a conversion to Christianity is a huge challenge for traditional and animistic belief. What is more, it is also a shame and honor issue, so converts who openly speak about their faith risk being pressured into recanting their Christian faith. This is also the case where family members are working for the government or are members of the village committee. And even if the individual family may be accepting or at least tolerating the conversion, there are cases where the village community put pressure even on non-believing family members to make the convert change his/her decision.

Block 1.9: It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians. (3.00 points)

As all Christian gatherings are seen as being potentially dangerous by the authorities, every meeting needs to be approved by local officials, who effectively hinder meetings or declare them illegal. Most villages are led by a village chief (*pho ban* or *nai ban*) and one or two assistants who are elected by the villagers to oversee all activities in their village and maintain peace (in the sense of preserving the culture). District and provincial officials sometimes use their positions and threaten Christians with expulsion from their villages for Christian activities including worship, prayer and Bible reading. As Christians are closely watched, meetings with others are

always noted and visits from Christians coming from outside the village are even more difficult. Many Lao believe they are protected by *phi* (spirits). This fear of offending the spirits turns family members against Christians. Sometimes they even hinder Christians from leaving the house. Meeting up with fellow Christians is less difficult in the cities. However, when Christian leaders visit fellow believers in some provinces, they prefer to do so during the evening hours, when less prying eyes are watching and it is safer to meet.

Block 1: Additional information

All Christians are closely monitored, and at times, the help of registered churches is used for keeping an eye on Christian activities. The promotion of any ideas that differ from the state's ideology or that supposedly go against national interests and culture can invite severe action from the state. (Thus, when Christians talk about a "kingdom" to come and a "king" to follow, this can lead to difficulties.) As soon as writing containing such ideas are discovered by family or local community, a convert will be exposed and placed under pressure to recant. Converts always have to be very careful how they worship, especially if they are the only Christians in their family. One Christian shared: "Family members are afraid that having the Bible and Christian materials at home will bring problems in their household because the spirits don't like it or the police might search their house."

In remote places, houses only have one room (and in many places three generations are living under one roof) which makes it very difficult to find a place to read the Bible, pray or worship undisturbed and unnoticed. If converts are discovered praying etc., they will very likely experience physical and verbal abuse and may possibly be expelled from their homes. Most Christians in villages cannot put up Christian symbols because they will be accused of causing bad luck or of angering the spirits, and then face expulsion.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (3.75 points)

In provinces like Luang Namtha, Phongsaly and Houphan in the north and Savannakhet and Attapeu in the south, the local authorities (especially village leaders) seem determined to control any Christian witness and continue to harass, arrest and evict Christians from their homes. Christianity is seen as a Western phenomenon and a danger to Communist ideology and the nation. Local communities frequently assist in the monitoring of Christian activities. Many Christians believe that their phones are tapped, although this is hard to prove. Meetings and activities are always monitored and the teaching in Sunday services is carefully checked. One Christian summed it up by saying: "They just know what we're doing." Another said: "Believers think that their phones are tapped. Church leaders say that the people in the community would observe their routines and then authorities would know their plans and even Bible studies and training."

Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.75 points)

There have been cases of Christians being denied employment for faith-related reasons and of Christian business-owners being discriminated against. Hiring workers is usually done through recommendation and Lao people like to recommend someone from their own family. In this way, Christians are excluded from most jobs. And if they are employed somewhere, they often hide their faith in order to avoid discrimination and abuse. This can lead to younger Christians deciding to give up their faith in order to be employed. Indeed, some employers are known to openly make this a condition.

Block 3.6: Christians have been hindered in participating in communal institutions, forums, etc., for faith-related reasons. (3.25 points)

Christians are normally reluctant to participate in communal activities and village meetings as these are often peppered with non-Christian religious elements. On the other hand, Christians are also often hindered in joining such meetings since villagers and local authorities believe that their mere presence will anger the spirits and bring bad luck to the community. Although this depends on the village concerned, the feeling of being left out can weigh heavily on Laotian Christians. As one Christian said: "We are like outsiders for the community." In some places, Christians are not included in official village statistics.

Block 3.12: Christians have been fined for faith-related reasons (e.g. jizya tax, community tax, protection money). (3.25 points)

Local authorities fine Christians for illegal meetings. In some cases, materials owned by Christians (e.g. cars and technical equipment) have been confiscated. Christians are often victims of extortion and pastors sometimes give gifts to the authorities at Christmas unasked, partly to curry favor with them. Applying for any type of government document can entail requests for extra payment from Christian applicants. A standard payment can increase ten-fold for a Christian. There were also reports of village chiefs requiring families to pay a high sum of money per year "for being Christians". Sometimes, Christians are also made to pay the police for their own monitoring (and for being able to meet and worship). A country expert states: "When the authorities arrest Christians, believers had to pay hefty amounts to bail them from prison. They also have to pay for their stay in prison."

Block 3: Additional information

Christians are regularly accused of being divisive. The community expects Christians to take part in Buddhist and animistic ceremonies. The basic ceremony is a communal event to invoke the spirits, and expresses goodwill, good luck and good health to those being honored. The ceremony is meant to invoke spirits to return home and re-establish equilibrium. A white thread tied around the wrist is supposed to ensure protection from spirits. Christians prefer to stay away from such ceremonies that involve the spirit world, also because it often involves eating sacrificed food afterwards. Their refusal to participate in the rituals often causes friction in the village. Community leaders and neighbors expect everyone to participate in village ceremonies, fearing curses from the spirits if some refuse. If they cannot force a Christian to participate, they

commonly ask a local Buddhist monk or village spiritual head to curse the Christian.

Christians are seen as being divergent to the norm and are frequently visited by the police. Some Christians, especially leaders and those suspected of being active in missionary work, need to request a permit for almost every step they take. They are also expected to make a report about trips they have made, even when it was only to the neighboring village. There have been many reports about church leaders being interrogated and some have to supply church statistics as frequently as three times a year. A country expert adds: "Many Christian students who want to pursue university studies do not have an equal chance to access scholarships offered by the government because of their faith. This is because most of the scholarships are given to those who will work later on with the government, and because they are Christians, the government won't allow them to work as civil servants."

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (4.00 points)

Article 9 of the Constitution (amended in 2003) states that it is the duty of the State to respect and protect all religions and particularly mentions Buddhists and Buddhist monks. Article 43 says that Lao citizens have the right and freedom to believe or not to believe in any religion. However, since the promulgation of Decree 92 in 2002, those broad provisions on religious practices have been abused to make the exercise of religious freedom more difficult. Decree 92 demands the government's prior consent for any religious activity: Without this consent, any activity is considered illegal. Conversion to a new faith, preaching, and conducting church activities all require government permission. Based on the experience of Christian leaders, the government hardly ever gives permission. Decree 92 was then replaced by Decree 315 in August 2016, which defines the government's role as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities (an [assessment](#) of Decree 315 by USCIRF was published on 16 September 2021). In a positive development, the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have started working hard to educate provincial and local officials about Laos' obligation to Article 18 UDHR. These efforts are part of a long process which still needs to bear fruit.

Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (4.00 points)

There is no independent civil society in Laos. NGOs have to be registered with the government, organized in the Lao Front for National Development and cannot openly profess their religious basis and faith. The Decree on Association that took effect in January 2018 fundamentally abolished freedom for NGOs to develop and implement their activities. It also required all associations (including religious denominations or groups) to be legally registered and regulated by the government, including reporting of and government's approval on sources of funds. The decree gave power for the government to prosecute members or people who are part of unregistered associations. Activities of NGOs should be pre-approved by government ministries and are limited to specific areas of social work. Article 31 of the Decree specifies the prohibitions of associations; these prohibitions include activities that threaten local and ethnic traditions

(which can easily be misused against Christians and church work in tribal communities). The government bans all political parties other than the Communist Party.

Block 4.5: Christians have been discriminated against when engaging with the authorities (local administration, government, army, etc.) for faith-related reasons. (3.75 points)

This discrimination by officials is not limited to employment or the issuance of documents, but includes disadvantageous treatment in almost any aspect of administration, e.g. when applying for permits. Often this is connected with missing or held-back family books or ID cards, but this results in permits not being granted and opportunities denied. Christians are also excluded from any benefits other citizens may receive. And even if authorities are moved to act, Christians often have to pay higher "service fees" than other citizens. The local level administration is much more prone to this behavior than the national level.

Block 4.14: Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished. (3.75 points)

Hotlines have been set up for people to call for government assistance when needed, but many - including Christians - are reluctant to use this possibility. According to a [report](#) by Radio Free Asia (RFA, 16 June 2023): "A Lao resident who identified as a Christian said that Christians have used government hotlines once in a while to inform the ministry when they are harassed by local authorities. Sometimes officials come to try to solve the problem but most of the time the complaints are ignored, the person said. 'The good part of using the hotline is that we can inform the ministry of problems that we are concerned about and need them solved,' the Christian said. 'However, many problems are still not solved ... they always say they are still working on it.'"

Block 4: Additional information

Visiting another province requires approval from the provincial head of one's own province and of the province to be visited. Getting such permission for church work is almost impossible and consequently many Christians make visits without permits at the risk of being fined or imprisoned. Travelling abroad can bring known Christians increased scrutiny, including a search of their belongings, when leaving the country. The media continues to present Christianity as a remnant of the colonial days and a source of anger for the spirits. In rural areas, the village leader also acts as a judge for the village. When Christians experience discrimination, intolerance and persecution and raise the issues before the authorities, either nothing happens or the persecution becomes worse, forcing them to leave the village. And there is another dimension to this problem: One local Christian reported: "Believers try hard to settle matters at the local level because they are afraid that once the complaint reaches the national level, persecution will rise. For when the appeal goes to the national level, the provincial authorities get unhappy and push the village authorities to do something to stop the growing number of Christians in their village."

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (4.00 points)

All church activities are monitored. Secret police attend services, count the number of people attending and take notes of the sermons and the proceedings. Sometimes police officers in uniform openly monitor churches. Services in recognized churches are rarely hindered, disturbed or obstructed, although incidents involving LEC churches were recorded in the WWL 2024 reporting period as well. Despite all government training sessions on freedom of religion, pastors are often simply told: "You are not allowed to have any opinion". The government is slightly more tolerant of religious practices in urban areas but has often acted severely in rural areas, where local officials and police regularly interfere with the right to worship in a number of places and are aware of all groups that meet for worship.

Block 5.7: Churches have been hindered from openly integrating converts. (4.00 points)

Conversion is seriously discouraged in many ways by the local authorities and community. Converts who stick resolutely to their new-found faith may finally be able to attend a church, but there are reports that the police have been giving stern reminders to churches about not proselytizing in surrounding villages. There are also places, especially in the northern provinces, where the district authorities force churches on an almost weekly basis to give the names of those attending services. One Christian pointed out: "There's always a problem for churches when their members are growing in number." Many of the violent incidents reported also had a clear connection with churches growing and actively witnessing within their local communities.

Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (3.75 points)

All Christian preaching and teaching is closely monitored. In the WWL 2024 reporting period, there have been reports that sermon texts and other teaching had to be submitted to authorities beforehand, although this policy does not seem to be implemented everywhere equally strictly. Details of all materials used have to be reported to the local authorities to be checked, and preachers and teachers need to be officially recognized as such and carry an ID card issued by the LEC.

Block 5.13: Churches have been hindered in importing Christian materials from abroad. (3.75 points)

Christian materials from abroad can only be imported in a limited and centralized way. The government has to approve all Christian books and other materials that are to be used and sold in the country. There is one Christian bookstore in the capital Vientiane which also sells a few foreign books.

Block 5: Additional information

Communities often hinder churches from setting up and building places of worship. At times, the community uses force to stop church construction. Detailed administrative requirements

must be fulfilled before a church can be built and/or registered. As a country expert said: "It seems that at every level the government will make very steep requirements in order to allow a church to be built. As indicated by many, the requirements are impossible to fulfill. This is likely due to the authorities trying to make sure that churches don't have the capacity to grow." This is especially the case in the northern provinces (for instance in Luang Namtha and Phongsaly). In some rural areas, a local officer is even required to attend worship in order to monitor the Christians. Pastors have been frequently targeted for arbitrary arrests, detention and abduction. The problems mainly lie with the regional and city governments. In the WWL 2024 reporting period, there was a case where Bibles were confiscated from a church, and one Christian shared that church training could only take place in the provincial capital, making it challenging to participate both timewise and financially.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced.

Possible reasons for this may be:

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:

- *Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).*
- *In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar. Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.*

3. The use of symbolic numbers:

- *In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number*

is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWL chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

Laos: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	4	0
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	25	4
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	65	18
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	2	2
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	0	0
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	156	10 *
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	78	9
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	22	9
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	159	35
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	5	0

In the WWL 2024 reporting period:

- **Christians killed:** In the reporting period, four Christians were killed for their faith, beginning with the killing of Pastor Sy in October 2022 (see: *Specific examples of violations*).
- **Christians attacked:** At least 159 Christians were expelled from their communities, almost all also included attacks against Christians - see above: *Specific examples of violations*).
- **Christians arrested:** More than 60 Christians were detained/arrested.

- **Churches attacked:** There have been reports of at least 25 churches being attacked and some destroyed in the provinces of Attapeu, Borkeo, Xayabouly, Salavan, Savannakhet, and Khammouane. For security reasons, no further details can be given.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** Farming land was taken away from some Christians, effectively cutting them and their families off from their source of livelihood. Where there were reports of Christians being attacked, it was often indicated that the homes of Christians were attacked (see above: *Specific examples of violations*).

5 Year trends

The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

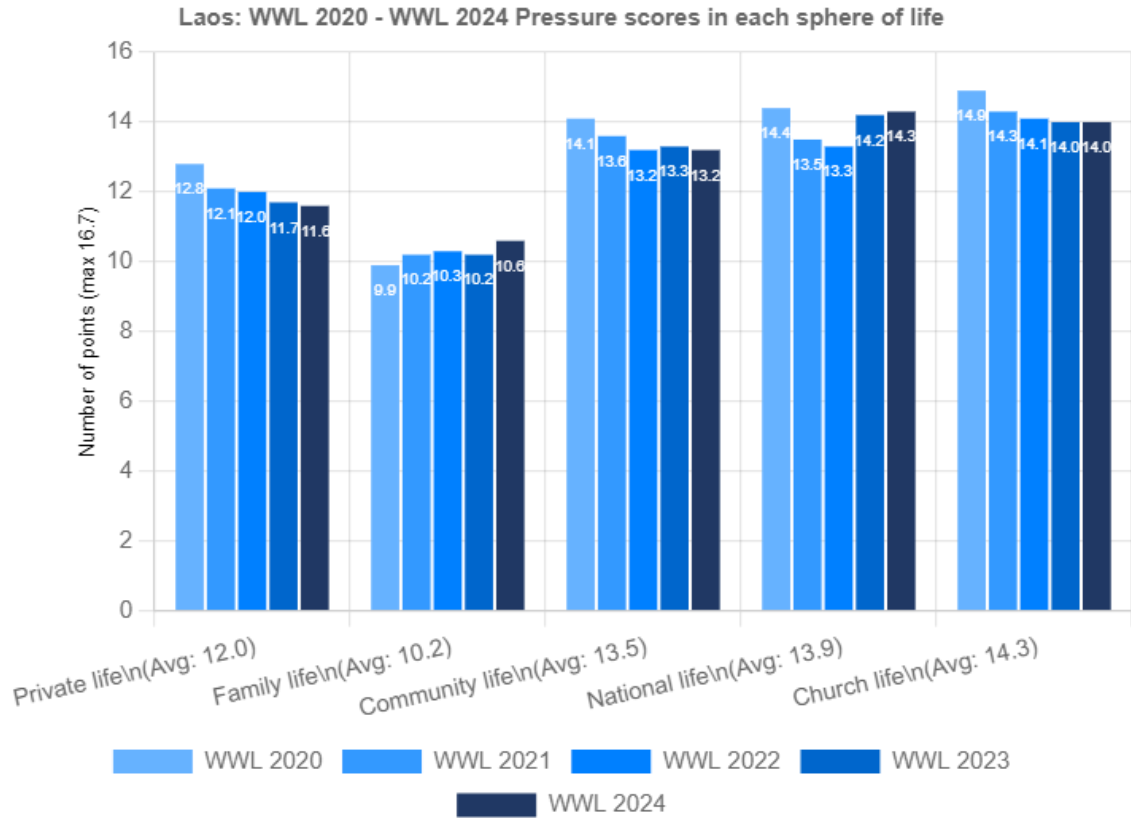
5 Year trends: Average pressure

Laos: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	12.7
2023	12.7
2022	12.6
2021	12.7
2020	13.2

The table above shows that the average level of pressure has been very high throughout the last 5 WWL reporting periods. Average pressure appears to have stabilized around the 12.7 point mark.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

The chart below shows that the pressure in the *Church* and *Private spheres of life* had previously levelled off at an extreme and a very high level respectively. In WWL 2021, the overall level decreased in the score for *National life*, reflecting the beginning of local authority training on freedom of religion and belief. So far, these training sessions did not bear tangible fruit as pressure in the *National sphere* rose in WWL 2023 and 2024 to an extreme level again. The levels of pressure in *Private, Family* and *Community life* show that families of converts continue to prioritize ancestor and spirit worship.



5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



The chart above shows that the score for violence against Christians moved in waves from the WWL 2020 reporting period, but hovered around 6 points. The score in WWL 2024 more than doubled, reflecting an unprecedented four killings of Christians and many more reports about churches closed, Christians expelled and other violence committed.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Denied custody of children; Forced divorce
Security	-
Social and Cultural	Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

While Christian men and women tend to suffer equal levels of social ostracism and pressure in Laos, there are areas of specific vulnerability for women. Converts face the greatest levels of pressure. Within their local community they face mockery and isolation within the workplace and are looked down upon by those around them. In the domestic sphere, they may be beaten, disowned or put under intense pressure to renounce their faith. Girls may also experience discrimination and harassment at school, although they are less likely to be physically beaten compared to boys.

In Lao culture, value is placed on marital status. Christian women are undesirable marriage prospects, and so single Christian women attract additional insults and threats, as are deemed to be of lesser worth. Child marriage also poses specific risks; a country expert comments, “young girls are often married to older men and when they convert, they are more vulnerable to persecution from the spouse and the extended family.” Lao Christian women further face being divorced due to their faith, and being denied custody of their children.

Since Christian men are commonly arrested and detained for their faith, their wives suffer economically from the loss of the financial provider, as well as emotionally. The families must usually pay considerable sums of money to secure their release, triggering further financial paralysis. Without the aid of her husband, the woman is left with the burden of providing for their family or finding shelter if the village chief evicts them from the village. Female Christian leaders have also been arrested.

Pastors in northern areas of Laos have raised concerns about the human trafficking of brides to China. Girls from ethnic minorities, including Hmong Christians, have been trafficked into China, where they are forced into sex work or marrying local men ([La Croix, 26th May 2021](#)).

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Political and Legal	Imprisonment by government
Security	Abduction; Violence – death; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	-
Technological	-

Church leadership in Laos tends to be dominated by men, a role that has become frequently targeted. Pastors are vulnerable to attacks on churches and to incarceration by the authorities. Following the death of a pastor in Khammoun ([RFA, 12 December 2022](#)), church workers and leaders reportedly travel in pairs for fear of similar attacks.

Pastors can also face incarceration, although may be released upon paying a large fine. The economic pressure of fines such as these, as well as the time when the church leader is absent, weakens church congregations and evokes fear. Families are similarly affected by these detentions, as Christian men remain the primary providers in Laos. A country expert observes, “when the bread winner who is the man or pastor is arrested the whole family suffers. The children are mocked in school and the family suffers in the village.”

Male Christians also face persecution and unfair treatment in the workplace, causing additional economic pressure. They may be excluded from government and military jobs for example, or may lose their job altogether. For those in military training, men are conditioned to give their sole allegiance to the Communist Party and to hate the Party’s enemies. Among the enemies are groups that threaten to alter the culture and traditions of Laos; this includes Christianity, which is viewed as a Western and unwelcome religion. Within schools too, Christian boys are more likely to experience physical beatings and harassment.

Persecution of other religious minorities

Taking up the subject of Decree 315, which is applicable to all religions, the US State Department states (IRFR 2022 Laos, pp.4-5):

- "The decree states that nearly all aspects of religious practice – such as congregating, holding religious services, travel of religious officials, building houses of worship, modifying existing structures, and establishing new congregations in villages where none existed – require permission from a provincial, district-level, and/or central MOHA office. The MOHA may order the cessation of any religious activity or expression of beliefs not in agreement with policies, traditional customs, laws, or regulations within its jurisdiction. It may stop any religious activity it deems threatening to national stability, peace, and social order, causing serious damage to the environment, or affecting national solidarity or unity among tribes and religions, including threats to the lives, property, health, or reputations of others. The decree requires the MOHA to collect information and statistics on religious operations, co-

operate with foreign countries and international organizations regarding religious activities, and report religious activities to the government. ... The decree requires Buddhist clergy to hold identification cards, and clergy of other religions are required to hold certificates issued by their own religious organizations to confirm they have received legitimate religious training."

Buddhists outside of mainstream Buddhist teaching sometimes face problems when registering monks as official clergy. Among the ethnic communities, the Hmong (often animists or Christians) have faced the greatest oppression from the government. Muslims, Hindus and adherents of Bahai also form tiny minorities in the country which also face pressure from Communist state authorities.

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Communist and post-Communist oppression, blended with Dictatorial paranoia

It is unlikely that the Communist Party leadership change will lead to any opening up in society to the benefit of religious or ethnic minorities. No initiatives will be tolerated which cannot be controlled by the Communist authorities and this will most likely remain true for the Christian minority well into the future. It reflects the unbroken power of the country's Communist Party, especially as the economic dependency on China continues to grow. The authorities continue to closely watch and if they see the need, come down very harshly on any perceived dissent and deviation (which includes Christian faith). It is even said that the authorities are [replicating](#) China's efforts in controlling and persecuting religion (UCA News, 11 July 2023).

Clan oppression

The fear of spirits permeates and dominates the life of most Laotians, especially in rural areas. Whoever does not join in their veneration, not only excludes themselves from the community, but is also seen as bringing doom and the revenge of spirits upon the whole community. This belief - and hence the persecution of converts to Christian faith - is so deep-rooted that it will not change in the foreseeable future.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (4.00 points): assessment - <https://www.uscirf.gov/release-statements/uscirf-releases-factsheet-laos-decree-315>
- Block 4.14: Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished. (3.75 points): report - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/hotline-06162023104604.html>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: La Croix, 26th May 2021 - <https://international.la-croix.com/news/world/lao-women-trafficked-into-china-under-false-pretenses/14368>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: RFA, 12 December 2022 - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/pastor-12122022104112.html>
- Future outlook: replicating - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/laos-accused-of-replicating-chinas-religious-persecution/101928>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Laos>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.