

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

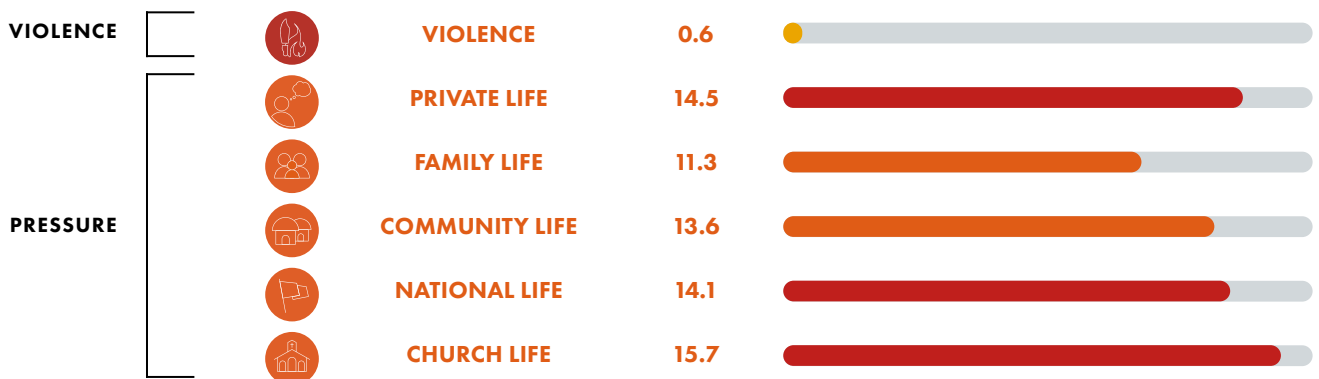
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
25

Turkmenistan



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

Turkmenistan is a totalitarian country where state agents constantly monitor individual believers, religious groups (and the rest of society) and impose restrictions. Even Russian Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic churches may experience the monitoring of Sunday services. The printing or import of Christian materials is restricted. Christians from a Muslim background bear the brunt of rights violations both at the hands of the state and from family, friends, and the community.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Serdar Berdimuhamedow

POPULATION

6,202,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

66,700¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Authoritarian Presidential Republic



Sunni Islam is the main religion. Most Turkmen follow the traditions rather than teachings of Islam. There are strict restrictions imposed by the government on religion, such as state appointing Muslim clerics, surveilling and dictating religious practice, and punishing nonconformity through imprisonment, torture, and administrative harassment. According to World Christian Database, the next largest religious categories are agnostics and atheists, found particularly in the capital Ashgabat and other major cities. The small Christian minority is weak due to high levels of division and little cooperation between the denominations, which plays into the hands of the government.

How the situation varies by region

Rights violations by government officials against Christians occur all over the country. Pressure from family and the community on Christian converts from a Muslim background is stronger in rural areas.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

Historical Christian communities

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has accustomed itself to the limitations set by the government and is therefore left more or less undisturbed. Services may be monitored, but they are conducted unhindered. Printing or importing Christian materials is restricted.

Converts to Christianity

Christian converts from a Muslim background experience violations from the state and strong pressure from family and the community.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Non-traditional Christian communities include Baptist, Evangelical, and Pentecostal groups. Aside from converts, these communities experience the highest levels of rights violations for their faith. Violations include raids, threats, arrests, and fines, especially when their churches have not been registered.

Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	66,700	1.1
Muslims	5,983,000	96.5
Agnostics	121,000	2.0
Atheists	26,400	0.4

Source²

Turkmenistan gained independence in 1991 during the collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite extensive natural resources, unemployment and poverty rates are high. Turkmenistan is a one-party state with a forced labor prison apparatus that incarcerates thousands of people in appalling conditions. The government requires strict registration of religious groups every three years and monitors all their operations within its borders. Religious groups must report all funding, especially foreign, or face heavy fines and arrest of leaders.

¹ Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

² Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Dictatorial paranoia:

Only state-controlled institutions are allowed. Protestants are frequently branded “extremists” due to their religious activities outside state-sanctioned structures. The government views Protestants as a threat to the political status quo, in need of control and suppression.

Islamic oppression blended with Clan oppression:

Muslims who convert to Christianity are likely to experience pressure and physical violence from their families and local communities, who seek to compel them to return to Islam. Some converts experience domestic incarceration or exclusion from their communities. As a result, many attempt to keep their faith a secret.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Gaps remain regarding women’s legal protection in Turkmenistan, including against domestic violence and sexual harassment. Prevalent Islamic culture places women in a subordinate position to men. Female converts are particularly vulnerable to beatings, house arrest, verbal abuse, threats, rejection, abduction and forced marriage. Women and girls remain vulnerable to sexual harassment and rape, though rarely report cases due to stigma and shame, and impunity is regularly granted to perpetrators. Abusing women is used as a tool for the intimidation and distress of their husbands, families, and churches.

- Abduction
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

MEN

Men normally hold leadership roles within families and churches. Consequently, persecution directed against men impacts their families and congregations, causing fear, anger and financial hardship. State agents look for any excuse to fine Christian men, and authorities exert influence over those in leadership positions. Christian leaders face challenges in obtaining training, and there are tight restrictions around religious education. In mandatory military service, men face discrimination, intolerance and persecution. At a family and community level, Muslims obstruct Christian business activities, and converts face harassment, interrogation, threats, discrimination, shaming and beatings.

- Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings, and rites
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Economic harassment via fines
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Imprisonment by the government
- Military / militia conscription/service against conscience
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	26	70
2022	25	69
2021	23	70
2020	22	70
2019	23	69

The WWL 2023 score for Turkmenistan is one point higher than in WWL 2022. The situation is one of stability, with only minor changes in some areas of pressure and violence in the country. The pressure is extremely high in the Private and Church spheres of life. The two main persecution engines in Turkmenistan are Dictatorial paranoia and Islamic oppression (blended with Clan oppression) and are active in all spheres of life. Islamic oppression (blended with Clan oppression) dominates in the Private and Family spheres of life, while Dictatorial paranoia dominates in the National and Church spheres of life. Both engines meet each other in the Community sphere of life. Muslim families, friends and villagers exert pressure on converts in particular, while the government imposes many restrictions on church activities.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **Christians attacked:** At least 22 Christians were physically or mentally abused. The majority of reported cases involve persecution within a convert's family, such as beating, threats and isolation.

WWL Year	Christians physically or mentally abused
2023	22
2022	27*

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

Private life

The government strictly controls religious literature imported or produced in the country. It is dangerous to privately own Christian materials; possession is considered evidence of conversion, which is viewed as betrayal of the family and culture. Family and community will often react to conversion with social pressure, economic exclusion or even violence.

Family life

The predominantly Muslim society places immense pressure on the children of converts. In particular, they receive Islamic teachings, even against the will of their parents. Children of converts and Protestants are often ostracized from the wider community as a way to compel them back into Islam.



Community life

Converts are threatened by family and community (including local Islamic leaders) in an effort to make them give up their Christian faith. Community members and state authorities alike will monitor and harass unregistered Protestants whom they accuse of evangelism. As a result, Christians face threats, discrimination, obstruction, and fines.

The most egregious examples are state-led raids, usually at the behest of local Muslim informers.

National life

The hostility of Turkmen society towards Christians is supported by a large and antagonistic state apparatus which seeks to compel social, and therefore religious, unity on the population. The Law on Religion includes a ban on unregistered religious organizations and a ban on private religious education. The regime censors Christians, controls the media, and prohibits opposition parties.

Church life

Obtaining legal status for non-registered churches is virtually impossible. All registered churches are required to re-register every three years under the new law, a complicated and time-consuming procedure. Churches, especially Protestant, can also struggle to obtain buildings due to societal hostility by landlords against Christians.



International obligations & rights violated

Turkmenistan 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)

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

- Non-registered churches are raided, with members arrested, threatened, and fined (ICCPR Arts. 9 and 18)
- Christians and their activities are closely monitored by the authorities (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christian converts experience pressure and violence from their family and community to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Access to religious literature is severely restricted and subject to official screening and approval (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Female converts face physical beatings, house arrest, verbal and physical abuse, threats, and rejection from their own family because of their faith (ICCPR Arts. 9, 12 and 18)

Situation of other religious minorities

The government does not focus on any specific religious group. Muslims, Christians, Jews and Baha'is all experience a high level of state surveillance and oppression. Notably, the government is particularly harsh on individuals who refuse government service by conscientious objection.



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Open Doors in Turkmenistan

Open Doors provides immediate aid to Central Asian believers when they are jailed, excluded from families and communities, and deprived of livelihood and employment because of their faith in Christ. We also strengthen the persecuted church in Central Asia, primarily through:

- Literature distribution
- Prayer support
- Biblical training
- Children / youth training
- Women's ministry
- Advocacy and awareness training (SSTS)
- Presence ministry
- Vocational training
- Social-economic development projects

About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
