

World
Watch
Research

Laos: Full Country Dossier

December 2022



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Introduction

World Watch List 2023

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	94	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.7	92	91	92	92	91
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	88	87	85	86
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.2	89	88	88	87	86
5	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.1	16.3	9.1	88	91	92	90	87
6	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.6	14.8	14.4	16.7	88	87	85	80	80
7	Pakistan	13.4	13.8	14.8	14.8	12.9	16.7	86	87	88	88	87
8	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.8	15.8	16.5	10.7	86	85	86	85	85
9	Afghanistan	15.4	15.7	15.4	16.1	16.6	4.6	84	98	94	93	94
10	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	9.4	83	79	79	85	87
11	India	12.3	13.1	13.0	14.8	13.3	15.7	82	82	83	83	83
12	Syria	13.2	14.1	13.6	14.1	14.1	11.3	80	78	81	82	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.9	15.8	16.7	2.4	80	81	78	79	77
14	Myanmar	12.5	11.6	13.9	13.9	12.9	15.4	80	79	74	73	71
15	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.8	16.0	16.4	0.2	77	77	77	78	78
16	China	12.9	10.0	12.7	14.5	15.6	11.1	77	76	74	70	65
17	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	10.3	15.1	15.0	76	70	67	66	68
18	Iraq	14.1	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	4.6	76	78	82	76	79
19	Algeria	14.1	14.1	11.5	13.7	15.1	4.8	73	71	70	73	70
20	Mauritania	14.5	14.2	13.3	14.1	14.2	1.3	72	70	71	68	67
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	13.9	12.7	15.6	1.5	71	71	71	73	74
22	Colombia	11.8	8.9	13.1	11.3	10.4	15.4	71	68	67	62	58
23	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.5	9.6	13.8	15.6	71	68	67	66	48
24	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	68	66	68	70
25	Vietnam	11.8	9.6	12.8	14.6	14.4	6.9	70	71	72	72	70
26	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	14.1	15.7	0.6	70	69	70	70	69
27	Cuba	13.1	8.3	13.1	13.2	14.9	7.0	70	66	62	52	49
28	Niger	9.4	9.5	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.4	70	68	62	60	52
29	Morocco	13.2	13.8	10.9	12.2	14.5	4.8	69	69	67	66	63
30	Bangladesh	12.6	10.7	12.8	11.3	10.6	10.7	69	68	67	63	58
31	Laos	11.7	10.2	13.3	14.2	14.0	5.0	68	69	71	72	71
32	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.6	68	65	63	43	43
33	Indonesia	11.3	12.0	11.6	11.1	9.2	12.8	68	68	63	60	65
34	Qatar	14.2	14.1	10.5	13.2	14.4	1.5	68	74	67	66	62
35	Egypt	12.7	13.5	11.6	12.1	10.8	7.0	68	71	75	76	76
36	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.4	12.0	13.5	6.5	67	66	67	64	63
37	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.6	67	66	64	56	55
38	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	11.0	10.5	13.9	67	65	64	60	61
39	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.4	12.1	10.6	66	66	65	63	65
40	Bhutan	13.2	12.3	11.6	13.9	14.2	1.1	66	67	64	61	64
41	Turkey	12.8	11.5	11.8	13.0	11.5	5.7	66	65	69	63	66
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.5	66	63	62	57	56
43	Malaysia	12.8	14.3	11.4	12.2	11.1	3.9	66	63	63	62	60
44	Tajikistan	13.8	12.2	12.3	12.8	13.4	1.1	66	65	66	65	65
45	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.9	65	65	64	60	54
46	Brunei	14.8	14.6	10.1	10.9	14.4	0.4	65	64	64	63	63
47	Oman	14.0	14.1	10.3	13.3	12.9	0.6	65	66	63	62	59
48	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.6	11.9	12.7	14.2	1.1	65	64	64	64	63
49	Jordan	13.0	14.0	10.5	12.3	12.7	2.0	65	66	64	64	65
50	Nicaragua	10.8	5.9	11.9	12.8	13.6	9.4	65	56	51	41	41

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.3	64	63	62	61	61
52	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	64	63	62	60
53	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.6	63	61	58	55	52
54	UAE	13.4	13.4	9.9	11.2	12.8	1.1	62	62	62	60	58
55	Nepal	12.0	9.8	9.4	13.0	12.6	4.4	61	64	66	64	64
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	0.6	60	59	56	56	56
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.3	9.7	10.3	12.0	2.0	60	59	58	60	57
58	Azerbaijan	13.2	10.0	9.5	12.0	13.6	0.6	59	60	56	57	57
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.2	11.0	10.4	12.0	2.0	59	58	58	57	56
60	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	7.6	58	55	53	56	48
61	Russian Federation	12.3	7.9	10.3	11.8	12.8	2.0	57	56	57	60	60
62	Sri Lanka	12.8	9.1	10.6	11.3	9.5	3.9	57	63	62	65	58
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	8.9	57	50	42	42	41
64	Venezuela	6.0	4.6	11.7	10.2	11.4	11.7	56	51	39	42	41
65	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	11.1	55	52	48	48	43
66	Bahrain	12.7	13.3	8.7	10.7	8.8	0.9	55	57	56	55	55
67	Honduras	7.1	5.0	11.9	7.6	9.8	11.9	53	48	46	39	38
68	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	51	46	43	42
69	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	9.2	14.8	51	48	47	48	47
70	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	5.4	49	44	43	41	42
71	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	3.0	48	43	47	45	46
72	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.0	46	43	43	44	44
73	El Salvador	7.7	4.2	10.6	7.4	9.1	6.7	46	45	42	38	30
74	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	42	42	42	43
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	1.1	44	44	43	43	43
76	Belarus	9.5	3.8	4.8	9.4	12.1	3.3	43	33	30	28	35

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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 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- 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 including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

WWL 2023 Situation in brief / Laos

Brief country details

Laos: Population (UN estimate for 2022)	Christians	Chr%
7,481,000	207,000	2.8

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

Map of country



Laos: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	68	31
WWL 2022	69	26
WWL 2021	71	22
WWL 2020	72	20
WWL 2019	71	19

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

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

The 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 as has happened in the WWL 2023 reporting period again (see below: *Specific examples of violations of rights of Christians*).

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

9 February 2022: A family of 12 Christians was attacked and their house was [burnt down](#) in Dong Savanh village in Savannakhet province. Villagers were angry that this family followed a 'foreign religion'. The attack came after villagers prohibited the burial of the father of the family in the local cemetery in December 2021 (Radio Free Asia - RFA, 23 February 2022). A month after the attack, the family was still living in the forest and had been [ordered](#) by local authorities not to publish video footage of the case (RFA, 24 March 2022).

Specific examples of positive developments

None.

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: burnt down - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/driven-02232022133231.html>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: ordered - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/christian-family-03242022170133.html>

WWL 2023: Keys to understanding / Laos

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2021/22 country report – covering 154 countries, Laos not included	AI country report 2021/22	https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf	
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15351898	9 June 2022
Bertelsmann Transformation Index country report 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI report 2022	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/LAO	9 June 2022
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/laos/	9 June 2022
Crisis24 country report (Garda World) – covering 193 countries	Crisis24 country report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/laos	9 June 2022
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2021 – covering 167 countries	EIU 2021 (pp.39f)	https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf	9 June 2022
FFP's Fragile States Index 2022 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2022	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	2 August 2022
Freedom House's 2022 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Laos not included	Democracy Index 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2022 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/country/laos/freedom-world/2022	9 June 2022
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2021 report – covering 70 countries, Laos not included	Freedom on the Net 2021	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores	
Human Rights Watch World Report 2022 (country chapter) – covering 100+ countries, Laos not included	HRW 2022 country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022	
Internet World Stats 2022	IWS 2022	https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#la	9 June 2022
RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2022	https://rsf.org/en/laos	9 June 2022
Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2021	https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/laos	9 June 2022
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators (country profile) – covering 189 countries	HDI profile	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/LAO	9 June 2022
US State Department's 2021 International Religious Freedom (country profile)	IRFR 2021	https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/laos/	9 June 2022
USCIRF 2022 country reports – covering 15 CPC / 12 SWL, Laos not included	USCIRF 2022	https://www.uscifr.gov/countries	
World Bank country overview – covering 178 countries	World Bank overview	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lao/overview#1	9 June 2022
World Bank country profile data – covering 222 countries	World Bank profile	https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=LAO	9 June 2022
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 – covering 147 countries (divided per region)	Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 (pp.12-13)	https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/macro-poverty-outlook	9 June 2022

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). 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 country overview, development is well underway and Laos has become one of the fastest growing economies in the East Asian and Pacific region, despite being affected by COVID-19. 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); Christians face most difficulties 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, as has been illustrated by the case in February 2022 in Dong Savanh village (mentioned above: *Specific examples of violations of rights*).

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 bigger 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 leadership re-shuffle in January 2021, when Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith was also made [Secretary-General](#) of the Communist Party (RFA, 15 January 2021) did not bring any perceptible change. While this latter position is arguably the more important one in countries ruled by Communist parties, there is very little change in actual policy. Sisoulith announced that he would fight poverty and stand against corruption, but at the same time the Lao Peoples' Revolutionary Party and its leadership can be seen as a closely-knit [elite club](#) (East Asia Forum, 21 January 2021). Despite these announcements, drug trafficking (see below: *Social and cultural landscape*) and human trafficking remain big challenges and are politically sensitive matters. The fact that the authorities [rescued](#) trafficked Laotian women from the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (which is one of the big development projects set up with the help of China), illustrates the political challenges for the government (UCA News, 11 February 2022).

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 - nepotism and corruption when it comes to the economy, and opaqueness and limitations as far as political and social matters are concerned. The authorities put a 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).

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 in the previous reporting period (WWL 2022 - see below: *Security situation*). 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.

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 (OECD, 2019; [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 (OECD, 2019). 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 marriages occurring most commonly in rural areas, and among Hmong, Mon-Khmer and Chinese-Tibetan ethnic groups. According to [Girls Not Brides](#), rates are high for both girls (35% are married by 18) and for boys alike (11% married by 18).

Religious landscape

Laos: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	207,000	2.8
Muslim	8,700	0.1
Hindu	5,900	0.1
Buddhist	4,004,000	53.5
Ethno-religionist	3,112,000	41.6
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	17,200	0.2
Atheist	21,700	0.3
Agnostic	62,900	0.8
Other	40,440	0.5
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

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

According to WCD 2022 estimates, 53.5% 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. 41.6% adhere to ethnic religions (Chinese folk 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 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 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 2021, page 12):

- "LEC leaders continued to say that growth in church membership exacerbated tensions within some communities, particularly with villagers who were wary of minority religions. According to one official, 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), may leave 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.

Economic landscape

According to UNDP's HDI profile:

- **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 the World Bank country profile:

- Laos is classified as a lower-middle income country.
- **GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international USD):** 7.896
- **GDP per capita growth rate:** 2.5% (2021)
- **Poverty gap at 5.50 USD a day:** (2011 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 (Vietnam Plus, 12 November 2021). In its country overview the World Bank states: "Given the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and rising global prices, there is a danger that previous gains could be reversed." In September 2021, a [spike of COVID-19 cases](#) swept across the country and led to a lockdown of the capital Vientiane and travel restrictions (Straits Times, 20 September 2021); the country was 'reopened' on 9 May 2022. As a still relatively poor country, Laos does not have the means to stimulate its economy or keep it afloat for a long time and [debts](#) will be mounting (Eurasia Review, 17 July 2020).

The newly installed leadership in January 2021 announced a shift in its economic approach. The World Bank commented on this in its country overview: "The growth of the past two decades was predominantly driven by large-scale investments in capital intensive sectors, particularly in mining and hydropower. However, these investments have failed to support job creation, and some have entailed considerable environmental costs. Moreover, public investment in the power sector has been mostly financed by external debt, often on commercial terms, gradually jeopardizing macroeconomic stability."

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.

Women are, in general, more economically vulnerable than men. Looking at [UNDP's Gender Equality goal](#), it is clear that there remain large gender inequalities in relation to access to the labor market; women are systematically denied the same work rights as men. Additionally, sexual violence, exploitation and the [unequal burden](#) of domestic work all hinder women from

attaining positions in public office (OECD, 2019). Whilst Laos has one of the highest proportion of women in national [parliaments](#) (27.5%), the number of women in other decision-making institutions is only 5% (Statista, 2021).

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). To make things even more challenging, Laos' currency faced a strong depreciation in the reporting period: the Lao kip [fell in value](#) by 37.4 per cent against the US dollar and 32.9 per cent against the Thai baht in the official market from January to August 2022 (The Star, 8 October 2022).

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). Often, villagers are not properly compensated in [resettlement](#) and lack proper land and water resources (UCA News, 1 October 2021).

If the ties with China are drawn tighter, Christians will be strongly affected as 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. Ethnic minorities have protested against development projects, which led to [military operations](#) taking place against the Hmong minority in the country's north in the previous reporting period (WWL 2022 - ASEAN Today, 9 April 2021). 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.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the CIA Factbook and UNDP's HDI profile:

- **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:** 37.6%
- **Literacy rate:** 84.7% (age 15 and above, 2015 est.)
- **Mean years of schooling:** 5.3 years. Data from [UNESCO's](#) country profile (accessed 19 August 2022) 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 the World Bank country profile:

- **Population age:** 32% of all people are below the age of 14; 4.2% are above the age of 65 (2021).
- **Education:** The primary school completion rate is 89% (2020).
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 1.3% (2021), the rate for vulnerable employment is 74.3% (2019)
- **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.
- **Malnutrition:** Malnutrition still affects 30% 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 the UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators (HDI profile):

- **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.

Despite all economic growth, poverty is still a considerable factor in Laos and the slowing effect of the COVID-19 crisis was a strong blow to all efforts at improvement. 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 which 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). Therefore, Laos remains a hotspot for drug production and trafficking.

The re-opening of the country for tourists in May 2022 after the surge of COVID-19 infections was over, will still only lead to a gradual recovery and the effects of the pandemic will be felt long afterwards, especially in the rural areas which are more behind in healthcare and other forms of infrastructure than the data given above may show. Remoteness hampers development and efforts to improve the situation of the rural population. Christians are affected by this as well, especially as they are perceived in many villages as being outsiders, following a 'foreign religion'. Therefore, it is possible for Christians to be excluded from the small amounts of government assistance which the rural areas receive, not necessarily by the national authorities, but by local leaders.

Gender issues

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 against [indigenous women](#) (UN Women, 2022; IWGIA, 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 pub-

lished 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*).

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2022):

- **Internet usage:** 54.9% penetration - survey date: January 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 54.9% penetration – survey date: January 2022

According to the World Bank's country profile:

- **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 is almost half that of IWS: 25.5%). Although the capital of Laos, Vientiane, is still relatively small compared to other Asian cities, people from the rural areas are flocking to the cities 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.

According to the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (GIWPS), 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 based on the degree of freedom within individual households or, for Christian converts living under the strict supervision of family members, for instance.

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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 2022 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 to avoid social media.

Christians, many of whom live in rural areas, are naturally facing challenges in accessing online resources.

Security situation

The Laotian government is mainly focused on keeping the economy on a growth trajectory and keeping perceived dissidents in the country in check. In the previous reporting period (WWL 2022), the armed forces were used against ethnic Hmong people protesting against development projects in their region (see above: *Economic landscape*).

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. However, the country watches carefully Vietnam's policy of [cracking down](#) on the Hmong - many of whom are Christian (UNPO, 18 April 2019). 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) COVID-19 has damaged the economy's upward trajectory

For years, Laos enjoyed one of the highest economic growth rates in Asia, although one could see this as 'borrowed growth' bought from China and its major infrastructure projects. As a land-locked country, Laos is and will remain dependent on its larger neighbors Vietnam and China, as it needs access to the sea for trading. Social development has not kept pace with the economic progress, but it has seen some improvements over the last years, despite all the challenges still remaining. However, many of these hopeful developments - including the expected promotion from 'Least-developed' country status by 2024 - were derailed by the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis. Even though Laos seems to have suffered less health problems than many other countries due to the COVID-19 virus, the worldwide economic downturn has affected the country severely. Rural areas and the poor in society have felt the consequences first. Consequently, in its Country Economic Memorandum, the World Bank called for an [unlocking of policy](#) now that the completed international railroad has provided the potential to change its land-locked status (World Bank, 17 September 2021).

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.

In the prevailing economic situation, Laos seems not to see any other option but to rely even more 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

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WWL 2023: 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	47,700	23.0
Protestant	158,000	76.3
Independent	1,600	0.8
Unaffiliated	100	0.0
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	207,400	100.2
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	151,000	72.9
Renewalist movement	18,800	9.1

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

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, Salavan and Savannakhet in the south have traditionally been difficult places for Christians. The local authorities 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.

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.

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, 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."

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 2023: Persecution Dynamics / Laos

Reporting period

01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022

Position on the World Watch List

Laos: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	68	31
WWL 2022	69	26
WWL 2021	71	22
WWL 2020	72	20
WWL 2019	71	19

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

The drop in score of 0.6 points in WWL 2023 compared to WWL 2022 was caused by less cases of violence being reported. However, it should be noted that just after the WWL 2023 reporting period ended, reports of a Christian pastor killed for his faith emerged, showing that violence against Christians is still taking place on a substantial level. The pressure exerted on Christians by (mainly local) state authorities and a very strong pressure on converts from family, friends, neighbors and the local authorities did not cease. 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.

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 definition, it has a negative view of Christians, but has recognized Christianity as one of the four official religions, although it is seen as a Western ideology that challenges Communism. Despite all training to the contrary, 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 from the provincial to the 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 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 basis for the Lao culture. As one country expert said: "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						Weak		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 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 side, there are still a few reports indicating that LEC staff are monitoring independent churches.

Drivers of Clan oppression and Religious Nationalism

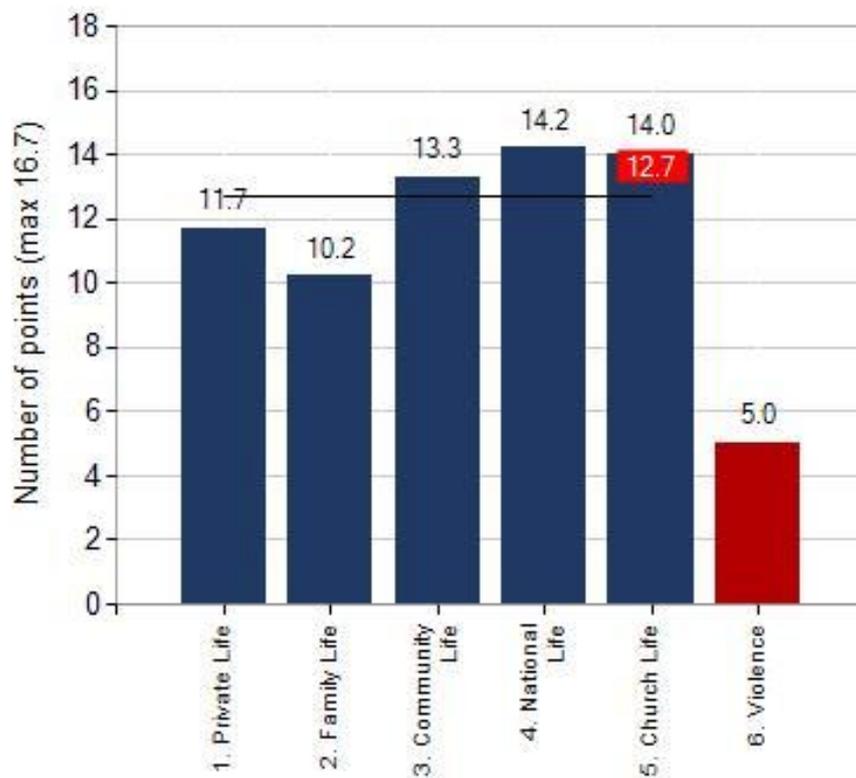
- **Extended family (Very strong):** Converts to Christianity experience persecution from their own family on a very frequent basis. The decision to stop following customary animistic rites has far-reaching consequences and puts converts outside a closely-knit society, especially as Laos is predominantly 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, at times in collusion with village chiefs as well, 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 as a means 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 2023 Persecution pattern for Laos shows:

- The average pressure on Christians over all *Spheres of life* remains almost unchanged: 12.7 points, a 0.1 point increase, and hence back to the average level of WWL 2021.
- 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*, while 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 on how to guarantee freedom of religion and belief for local authorities. Although more consequences on the ground need to be seen, this program has already had some positive effect.
- The violence score went down to 5.0 points in WWL 2023. However, it remains very difficult to gather reports from all provinces. It should also be kept in mind that right after the end of the reporting period of WWL 2023, reports of a Christian pastor killed for his faith emerged, illustrating that persecution in Laos can also turn very violent.

WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern for Laos



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 2023 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 cases in the WWL 2023 reporting period where Christians have been expelled from their villages because of speaking about their faith. In another place, Christians were warned by the police to stop mentioning their faith in conversations. 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. In the WWL 2023 reporting period, there were sporadic reports that in some places the authorities appeared more relaxed in their attitude towards Christians in general.

Block 1.7: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members. (3.00 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.

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.

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 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.75 points)

Buddhist teachings are considered to be part of Lao culture and are therefore part of the standard curriculum in schools. Christian students can be required to attend Buddhist temple rituals or be taught animist practices. Children of Christian families have even been denied admittance to some schools because of their faith, often also related to their parents' poverty; others were told that their studies were pointless since they were unlikely to find a job in the future if they remained Christians ("You need to make sure you get a job in the future. The government will not accept Christians who apply for jobs in government systems, even if you have had graduated from university or higher education"). Consequently, some have been denied the possibility of progressing to high school studies. They are also taught that Christians are betraying the nation by following a different religion, and that they are changing the culture.

Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (3.50 points)

Baptisms are one of the most visible signs of a growing church and of Christians finally cutting ties with their old beliefs. Therefore they are strongly opposed, especially at the village level and converts often have to wait for a long time until it is considered safe enough for them to receive baptism. Even then, this has to be carried out with the utmost caution, especially when taking place in rural areas; a country expert described baptisms having to be carried out in "a clandestine manner". Even the LEC is not able carry out baptisms freely throughout the country.

Block 2.5: Burials of Christians have been hindered or coercively performed with non-Christian rites. (3.25 points)

At Buddhist village funerals, in order not to anger the spirits (who are believed to cause illnesses and accidents in the village), the deceased have to be cremated "in the proper way". Christians are expected to do this too. For Christians with a Buddhist background, it is difficult to avoid such practices; Christians have been denied outright the use of communal burial places for their deceased. As a country expert shared: "Several incidents were recorded during the WWL 2023 period wherein believers were denied of the use of communal cemeteries and so they have to look for alternative places to bury the dead." In February 2022, a whole family was expelled from a village in Savannakhet province; they had already been [attacked](#) when they tried to bury their father and husband on 4 December 2021 (RFA, 23 February 2022).

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.00 points)

See comments for Block 2.8 above. Also, Christian children are sometimes made to drop out of school by putting pressure on them. If they keep attending classes, their peers often bully them as they are seen as being different. They may also be provided with fewer resources or assistance. In one case in the WWL 2023 reporting period, an 8 year old Christian girl was not only verbally abused, but also frequently beaten by her teacher, so that in the end she did not want to attend school anymore.

Block 2 - Additional information

Family records (in card or book form) are sometimes confiscated from Christians. This makes the registration of family events such as births, weddings and deaths impossible. At other times, a recommendation by the village leader (which is needed for obtaining a "family book") is refused on the grounds that the family in question has converted to Christianity or they are asked to pay an exorbitantly high, discriminatory fee. In some areas, weddings have been hindered or not registered for Christians, although registration in general can be a challenge in remote areas. Christians in rural areas said that the registering officers in general assume the following: Lao Loum people are Buddhist, and Hmong and Khmu people are Animist. As a result of this, many converts face difficulties in processing a change of religion listed for their children. Those in urban areas, however, can register according to the religious belief of their parents. Two common things families use to put pressure on converts is the threat of divorce (if married) and the loss of inheritance rights.

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 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."

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 3.12: Christians have been fined for faith-related reasons (e.g. jizya tax, community tax, protection money). (3.50 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, just 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 3.6: 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 they 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."

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 very active in outreach, 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. A country expert adds: "In some instances, donations from the government such as mosquito nets or rice were not shared with Christians in rural areas. But sometimes it is not just material resources: Information

is also withheld from believers. For example, vaccine information was not shared to believers in rural areas. Another form of harassment and social exclusion that Christians experience is that of cutting the electricity lines to a believer's family house or not granting permission to dig a water well. There are also cases when believers are not allowed to use their rice fields."

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. Once the training does 'kick in', the score for Block 4.1 should fall.

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. The local level administration is much more prone to this behavior than the national level.

Block 4.2: Officials have refused to recognize an individual's conversion as recorded in government administration systems, identify cards (etc.). (3.00 points)

There have been many cases reported where converts ran into trouble with the authorities when trying to obtain their family books, ID cards, any kind of permission, when dealing with the police, and when registering for school etc. A country expert explains: "Christians then had to ask for intervention at the provincial level, which is a long and cumbersome process. There are also places where Christians still have problems getting their national ID because the local authorities refuse to release it due to their Christian faith."

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. Officials who violate the rights of Christians often go unpunished. 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 2023 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."

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 2023 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 on 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.

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 5 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. For further discussion (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor's article dated 13 November 2013 available at:
<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

4. 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 WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

5. The symbol "x" in the table: This denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security concerns.

Laos: Violence Block question	WWL 2023	WWL 2022
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	1
6.2 How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	4	3
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	18	19
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	5
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	0	4
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	0	1
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)?	10 *	30
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?	9	39
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?	9	3
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	35	83
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	0	1

In the WWL 2023 reporting period:

- **Christians killed:** Within the reporting period, no Christian was killed for his faith, but just outside it in October 2022, a Christian pastor was killed.
- **Christians attacked:** There have been several cases where converts were expelled from their communities, almost all also included attacks against Christians - see above: *Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period.*
- **Christians arrested:** There were a number of reports of Christians being detained and arrested.
- **Churches attacked:** There have been reports of at least four churches being attacked and some destroyed in the provinces of Savannakhet, Sekong and Khammouane. For security

reasons, no details can be given.

- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** There have been fields taken away from 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 of rights in the reporting period.*

5 Year trends

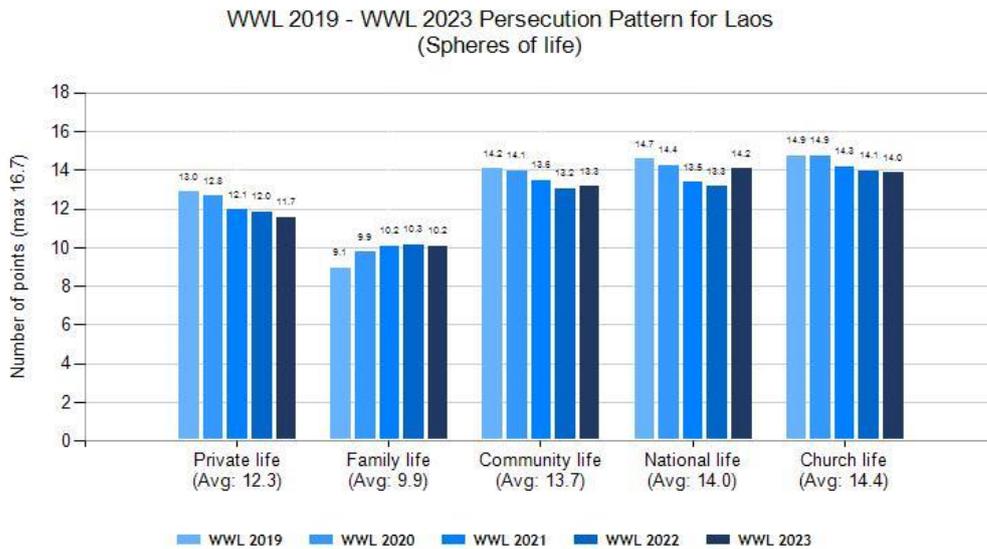
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Laos: WWL 2019 - WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2023	12.7
2022	12.6
2021	12.7
2020	13.2
2019	13.2

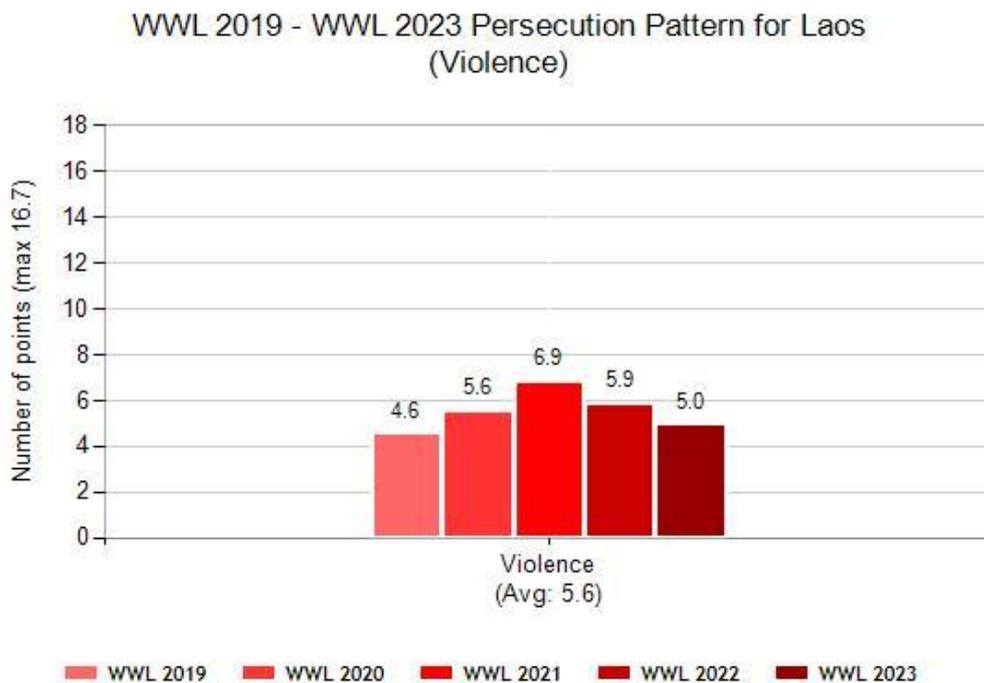
The table above shows that the average level of pressure has been very high throughout the last 5 WWL reporting periods. Average pressure appears to have stabilized around the 12.6-12.7 point mark.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



The chart above 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. However, it remains to be seen if and when these training sessions will bear tangible fruit as pressure in the *National sphere* rose in WWL 2023 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 had been growing steadily in the WWL 2019-2021 reporting periods. Despite churches being closed down and Christians being attacked and expelled from village communities in WWL 2022, the score for violence went down. The score in WWL 2023 then continued to decrease, but it has to be kept in mind that obtaining verified reports on incidents in Laos has always been a challenge.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Forced divorce
Security	Trafficking; Violence – physical
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 since they are deemed to be of lesser worth. Child marriage also poses specific risks; a country expert commented: “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.”

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 increasing 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 into 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	Forced out of home – expulsion; Forced to flee town/country; Incarceration by family (house arrest); 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. Sometimes, following incarceration, pastors are 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 observed: “When the breadwinner, 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.

A major problem across Laos that affects boys and young adults is drugs, which are inexpensive and widely accessible. The tactic is to lure young men into an addiction, then use the addiction as a psychological tool of manipulation – arguing that the addiction shows that they aren’t true Christians. Given the limited educational and professional opportunities afforded to Christians, many men and boys are drawn into addiction.

Persecution of other religious minorities

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 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).

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 2.5: Burials of Christians have been hindered or coercively performed with non-Christian rites. (3.25 points): attacked - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/driven-02232022133231.html>
- 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>
- 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>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the new Research & Reports page of the website od.org. As in earlier years, they are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) using the following links:

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