

WORLD WATCH LIST 2025

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

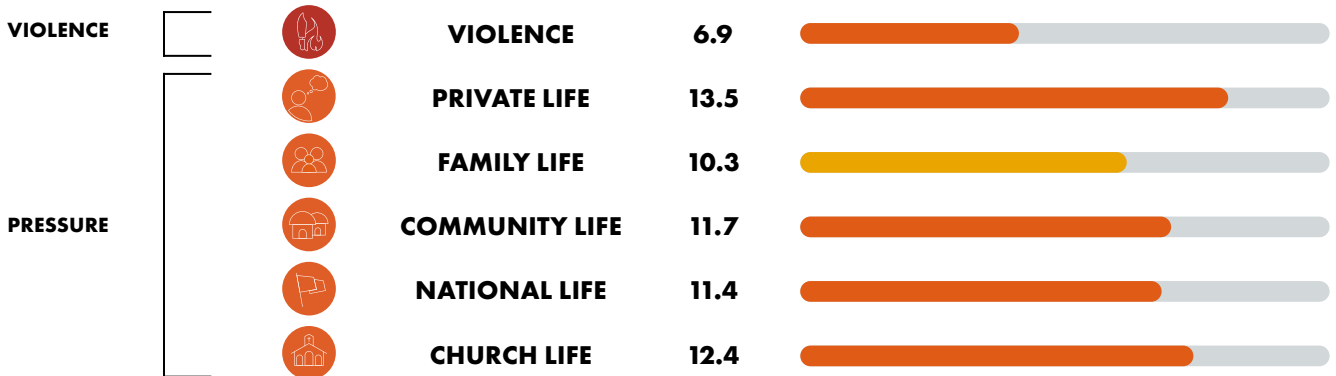
WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
47

KYRGYZSTAN



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LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



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

Key findings

Russian Orthodox churches experience fewer problems from the government, as they do not usually attempt to make contact with the Kyrgyz population. It is Christian converts with a Muslim background who experience the most violations. Some are locked up for long periods by their families and beaten. Local Islamic teachers preach against them and may cause them to be expelled from their communities. The local authorities have considerable power and tend to be under the influence of the local Muslim community.

Quick facts

LEADER

Sadyr Japarov

POPULATION

6,840,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

263,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	263,000	3.8
Muslims	6,061,000	88.6
Agnostics	361,000	5.3
Atheists	85,100	1.2

Source²

After independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan's Communist regime remained in power until the people revolted in 2005, known as the 'Tulip Revolution'. Kyrgyzstan was the first country to replace its post-Soviet regime with a democratically elected government. [President Japarov has served since 2020](#).

According to [Amnesty International](#) "the space for freedom of expression and association in Kyrgyzstan shrunk significantly in recent years. Over the past 18 months in particular, the authorities have intensified their campaign to stifle all forms of legitimate public criticism and peaceful dissent", especially from journalists and activists. Besides the trajectory of democratization, other concerns for Kyrgyzstan include [endemic corruption](#), a history of tense (and at times violent) inter-ethnic relations, border security

vulnerabilities and potential threats from radical Islamic elements. ([World Factbook Kyrgyzstan](#), accessed 29 August 2024)

According to [USCIRF](#), "In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Kyrgyzstan worsened as authorities increasingly enforced long-existing restrictive legislation regulating religion. Authorities rigorously penalized religious practices, including online religious expression, collective religious worship and studies, and, relatedly, the possession of unauthorized religious materials." The law requires all religious groups to register with the government and prohibits activity by unregistered religious groups.

Kyrgyzstan's culture is founded on Islamic values and traditions. 70 years of atheism during the Soviet era did not succeed in wiping this out. Rural areas are particularly affected, so Christians with a Muslim background not only have to cope with oppression from the government, but also from society around them. For instance, there have often been reports over the years of burials for converts to Christianity being blocked by Muslim villagers.

According to the World Christian Database, Muslims make up 86.6% of the population and are predominantly Sunni. The government of the country, however, is strictly secular. The initial growth of Christianity in Kyrgyzstan in the wake of independence in 1991 has come to a halt and numbers are now declining. As in many other

¹ Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

² Data source: Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

countries in Central Asia, churches in Kyrgyzstan are experiencing the emigration of Russian, Ukrainian and German members. One of the major problems for Christians in Kyrgyzstan and the other countries in Central Asia is the fact that there is little cooperation between the various denominations, which plays into the hands of the government.

How the situation varies by region

Pressure from Muslims on converts to Christianity is greater outside the major cities.

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

Expatriate Christians are not involuntarily isolated and are hence not treated as a separate category for WWL analysis.

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

These groups (of which the Russian Orthodox Church, ROC, is by far the largest) are not involved in evangelism among the Kyrgyz population and are not considered a threat by the authorities. The government has no interest in provoking Russia by attacking the ROC – the events in [eastern Ukraine](#) have set an example.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Because Kyrgyzstan's society is culturally Islamic, Christians with a Muslim background bear the brunt of persecution. They are under strong pressure from family, friends and community (including local authorities).

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

These groups are persecuted mostly because of their evangelistic activities and youth work. They suffer occasionally from raids, threats, arrests and fines by the authorities.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Dictatorial Paranoia

No religious activities beyond state-run and state-controlled institutions are allowed. In 2009, a new religion law was introduced which imposed many restrictions. Pressure from the authorities was stepped up in 2015 and a new draft law on religion is still under discussion. This new law (not yet implemented) would make the registration of church congregations almost impossible, as it would require each to have at least 500 church members.

Islamic Oppression Blended with Clan Oppression

If indigenous Muslims convert to Christianity, they will experience pressure and occasionally physical violence from their families, friends and local community to force them to return to their former faith. Some converts are locked up for long periods by their families and beaten. Local Islamic teachers preach against them and may cause them to be expelled from their communities. The Christian burial of converts is problematic and frequently provokes opposition from Muslim villagers.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

While men and women are equal in law, traditional Islamic culture places women at a level subservient to men within families. Christian women and girls can face suffering verbal and physical abuse, home detention, forced marriage, family violence and rape. Kyrgyzstan has a long tradition of bride-stealing; in rural, conservative areas, female converts risk being kidnapped and married to a Muslim. If already married, Christian women who convert are commonly divorced by their Muslim husbands. Female converts from a Muslim background are also subject to house-arrest by their families.

Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Men are usually financial providers in Kyrgyzstan, so when a Christian man loses his job or business because of his faith, his whole family will suffer. Known converts will be harassed and interrogated harshly by their family and local community. Persecution of church leaders (contextually, usually male) can be psychological, physical and economic, and impacts the wider congregation, instilling fear and anxiety. Christian men face daily discrimination, be it in the workplace, army or local community. Pressure is highest in rural areas, away from large cities.

Male typical pressure points:

- Denied communal resources
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Economic harassment via fines
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2025	47	66
2024	61	59
2023	59	59
2022	59	58
2021	55	58

The score for Kyrgyzstan (66 points) is higher than that of the past year (around 58 points). The pressure in all 5 spheres of life has increased in WWL 2025 – be it not hugely. It is the much higher number of violent incidents that created the jump in Kyrgyzstan's score. As in most other countries in Central Asia, the pressure in Kyrgyzstan is highest in the Private and Church spheres of life. Islamic oppression (blended with Clan oppression) dominates in the Private and Family spheres of life, while Dictatorial paranoia dominates in the National and Church spheres of life. Both engines 'meet' each other in the Community sphere of life. Muslim families, friends and villagers exert pressure on converts, while the government imposes many restrictions on church activities. No religious activities beyond state-run and state-controlled institutions are allowed.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **Churches attacked/damaged:** Sources reported that several registered churches and seminaries were closed on different excuses e.g., not meeting sanitary or fire safety etcetera in December in the capital city Bishkek; more churches were closed in Osh region.
- **Christians arrested:** Sources reported that in July 2024, three foreigners were detained in Issyk-Kul - adherents of the religious movement “Word of God”.
- **Christians forced to marry:** Sources reported that three girls were forcibly married.
- **Christians forced to leave their homes:** Sources reported that at least 10 Christians were forced to leave their parental homes because of extreme domestic violence.

WWL Year	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained	Christians forced to marry	Christians internally displaced
2025	10*	3	3	10*
2024	0	0	0	8

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the country's corresponding WWL Persecution Dynamics. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*.*



PRIVATE LIFE

Converts will try to hide their faith for fear of being discovered. They need to be particularly careful when meeting and can be monitored by their families. Unregistered believers will be cautious and avoid wearing crosses etc. so as not to draw the attention of the state and its agents. Non-traditional Protestants also need to be careful of being accused of evangelism – particularly in areas where the local authorities are strongly influenced by the Islamic community.

FAMILY LIFE

Families of converts may experience difficulties burying their dead because the community will refuse this. Burials of Christians are frequently denied by the local community and their rulers.

The law forbids youth work by churches. Sometimes, the administration in schools and institutes arrange state-funded meetings to combat “sects”, which is basically a propaganda drive against religious minorities, including Evangelical churches. Children of converts often face humiliation and insults at school from teachers and fellow pupils when it is discovered that they are Christians.

COMMUNITY LIFE

The state opposes Christians belonging to unregistered church groups. Converts are under pressure from their community to continue habits, codes etc. and to attend Islamic festivities in their villages. Christians from historical churches who have joined non-traditional church groups also face pressure to revert back to their original faith. In this case, such pressure is exerted by the community, not the authorities.

NATIONAL LIFE

The constitution guarantees freedom of conscience and religion and bans religious groups from undertaking actions inciting religious hatred. It establishes the separation of religion and state and prohibits the pursuit of political goals by religious groups. The law requires all religious groups to register with the government and prohibits activity by unregistered religious groups. Authorities maintained bans on 21 “religiously oriented” groups they considered extremist and detained nine members of one group for distributing banned religious material.



CHURCH LIFE

Church registration is obligatory, but the registration process with the authorities is cumbersome and includes many restrictions. The biggest problem is that a church needs 200 signatures to obtain a registration permit, a demand that practically no church can meet. A draft law has been pending for years that would raise the number of signatures needed for registration to 500.

Article 4 of the 2009 Religion Law prohibits the involvement of children in religious organizations without their parents' consent.

International obligations & rights violated

Kyrgyzstan has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under 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)

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

- Christians are threatened to be killed for their faith (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Churches are raided, services disrupted, and attendees are arbitrarily arrested (ICCPR Arts. 9; 18 and 21)
- Christians and their activities are monitored by the authorities and the surrounding community (ICCPR Art. 17)

Situation of other religious minorities

According to the [US State Department](#): “The government maintained bans on 21 “religiously oriented” groups it considered to be extremist, including Muslim groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and Yakyn Inkar. Under the law, banned groups may not conduct any activities within the country, including publishing material online.

In August, the government raided houses of worship in the southern Osh region and shut down 39 mosques and 21 madrassahs. According to government statements following the raid, the mosques that were closed did not have official documents or registration and were built in violation of established architectural and construction standards. Minority religious groups continued to report that the SCRA registration process was cumbersome, in particular the requirement to collect 200 signatures from citizens who identify as adherents. Some groups, including Jehovah’s Witnesses and Tengrists (traditional religion adherents), had applications pending for years without official action.

Open Doors in Kyrgyzstan

Open Doors strengthens the persecuted church in Central Asia primarily through:

- Literature distribution
- Prayer support
- Biblical training
- Children and youth training
- Women’s ministry
- Presence ministry
- Social and medical ministry
- Vocational training and micro-credit
- Social-economic development projects, like rehabilitation centers for children, men, and women



ABOUT THIS BRIEF

- The content of this document is based on the more detailed WWL Persecution Dynamics per country published annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2025 Open Doors International.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the WWL Persecution Dynamics per country, accompanying Background Information per country and the latest update of WWL Methodology. These are also available at the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).
- The WWL 2025 reporting period was 01 October 2023 – 30 September 2024.

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.