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World Watch Research

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Laos:

# Persecution Dynamics

December 2024



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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# Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| World Watch List 2025 – Top 50.....                                     | 2  |
| World Watch List 2025 – Ranks 51-78 .....                               | 4  |
| Copyright, sources and definitions .....                                | 5  |
| Reporting period .....  | 5  |
| Brief country details.....  | 6  |
| Map of country .....  | 7  |
| Dominant persecution engines and drivers.....                           | 8  |
| Brief description of the persecution situation.....                     | 8  |
| Summary of international obligations and rights violations.....         | 8  |
| Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period ..... | 9  |
| Christian communities and how they are affected.....                    | 10 |
| Areas where Christians face most difficulties.....                      | 10 |
| Position on the World Watch List .....                                  | 11 |
| Persecution engines.....  | 11 |
| Drivers of persecution.....   | 13 |
| The Persecution pattern .....   | 15 |
| Pressure in the 5 spheres of life.....                                  | 16 |
| Violence .....  | 26 |
| 5 Year trends.....  | 28 |
| Gender-specific religious persecution / Female .....                    | 30 |
| Gender-specific religious persecution / Male.....                       | 31 |
| Persecution of other religious minorities .....                         | 31 |
| Trends Summary .....  | 32 |
| Further useful reports.....   | 33 |
| External Links .....  | 33 |

## World Watch List 2025 – Top 50

| Rank | Country      | Private life | Family life | Community life | National life | Church life | Violence | Total Score WWL 2025 | Total Score WWL 2024 | Total Score WWL 2023 | Total Score WWL 2022 | Total Score WWL 2021 |
|------|--------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|----------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1    | North Korea  | 16.7         | 16.7        | 16.7           | 16.7          | 16.7        | 14.4     | 98                   | 96                   | 98                   | 96                   | 94                   |
| 2    | Somalia      | 16.5         | 16.7        | 16.6           | 16.6          | 16.7        | 11.1     | 94                   | 93                   | 92                   | 91                   | 92                   |
| 3    | Yemen        | 16.7         | 16.7        | 16.7           | 16.7          | 16.7        | 10.6     | 94                   | 89                   | 89                   | 88                   | 87                   |
| 4    | Libya        | 16.0         | 16.2        | 15.9           | 16.2          | 16.4        | 10.6     | 91                   | 91                   | 88                   | 91                   | 92                   |
| 5    | Sudan        | 14.1         | 14.2        | 15.5           | 14.9          | 15.3        | 16.1     | 90                   | 87                   | 83                   | 79                   | 79                   |
| 6    | Eritrea      | 14.6         | 14.9        | 15.5           | 15.9          | 15.9        | 12.2     | 89                   | 89                   | 89                   | 88                   | 88                   |
| 7    | Nigeria      | 13.5         | 13.9        | 14.6           | 14.9          | 14.5        | 16.7     | 88                   | 88                   | 88                   | 87                   | 85                   |
| 8    | Pakistan     | 13.6         | 13.9        | 15.0           | 15.0          | 12.9        | 16.7     | 87                   | 87                   | 86                   | 87                   | 88                   |
| 9    | Iran         | 15.0         | 14.6        | 13.5           | 15.9          | 16.5        | 10.9     | 86                   | 86                   | 86                   | 85                   | 86                   |
| 10   | Afghanistan  | 15.6         | 15.9        | 15.9           | 16.4          | 16.7        | 5.0      | 85                   | 84                   | 84                   | 98                   | 94                   |
| 11   | India        | 12.2         | 12.9        | 13.3           | 14.9          | 13.9        | 16.5     | 84                   | 83                   | 82                   | 82                   | 83                   |
| 12   | Saudi Arabia | 15.2         | 15.3        | 14.8           | 15.8          | 16.6        | 3.3      | 81                   | 81                   | 80                   | 81                   | 78                   |
| 13   | Myanmar      | 12.6         | 11.1        | 13.5           | 14.1          | 12.9        | 16.5     | 81                   | 79                   | 80                   | 79                   | 74                   |
| 14   | Mali         | 11.1         | 10.1        | 14.7           | 13.0          | 15.2        | 15.6     | 80                   | 79                   | 76                   | 70                   | 67                   |
| 15   | China        | 13.2         | 10.1        | 12.8           | 14.6          | 16.1        | 11.1     | 78                   | 78                   | 77                   | 76                   | 74                   |
| 16   | Maldives     | 15.6         | 15.3        | 13.7           | 15.8          | 16.5        | 0.7      | 78                   | 78                   | 77                   | 77                   | 77                   |
| 17   | Iraq         | 14.2         | 14.4        | 14.3           | 14.8          | 13.9        | 6.1      | 78                   | 79                   | 76                   | 78                   | 82                   |
| 18   | Syria        | 13.5         | 14.4        | 13.9           | 14.4          | 14.3        | 7.0      | 78                   | 81                   | 80                   | 78                   | 81                   |
| 19   | Algeria      | 14.7         | 14.3        | 11.5           | 14.7          | 16.0        | 6.3      | 77                   | 79                   | 73                   | 71                   | 70                   |
| 20   | Burkina Faso | 11.7         | 9.7         | 13.2           | 11.5          | 14.0        | 15.6     | 76                   | 75                   | 71                   | 68                   | 67                   |
| 21   | Morocco      | 13.2         | 13.8        | 11.6           | 12.9          | 14.3        | 8.3      | 74                   | 71                   | 69                   | 69                   | 67                   |
| 22   | Laos         | 11.8         | 10.7        | 13.5           | 14.1          | 13.9        | 9.8      | 74                   | 75                   | 68                   | 69                   | 71                   |
| 23   | Mauritania   | 14.6         | 14.2        | 13.8           | 14.2          | 14.2        | 2.8      | 74                   | 72                   | 72                   | 70                   | 71                   |
| 24   | Bangladesh   | 12.4         | 10.6        | 12.7           | 11.3          | 10.4        | 16.1     | 74                   | 71                   | 69                   | 68                   | 67                   |
| 25   | Uzbekistan   | 14.6         | 12.7        | 13.5           | 12.4          | 15.5        | 4.4      | 73                   | 71                   | 71                   | 71                   | 71                   |
| 26   | Cuba         | 13.2         | 8.5         | 13.9           | 13.3          | 15.1        | 9.1      | 73                   | 73                   | 70                   | 66                   | 62                   |
| 27   | CAR          | 10.3         | 8.6         | 13.9           | 9.6           | 14.0        | 15.6     | 72                   | 70                   | 70                   | 68                   | 66                   |
| 28   | Niger        | 9.4          | 9.6         | 14.5           | 7.7           | 14.6        | 15.7     | 72                   | 71                   | 70                   | 68                   | 62                   |

| Rank | Country      | Private life | Family life | Community life | National life | Church life | Violence | Total Score WWL 2025 | Total Score WWL 2024 | Total Score WWL 2023 | Total Score WWL 2022 | Total Score WWL 2021 |
|------|--------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|----------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 29   | Turkmenistan | 14.3         | 12.3        | 13.6           | 13.9          | 15.3        | 1.5      | 71                   | 70                   | 70                   | 69                   | 70                   |
| 30   | Nicaragua    | 12.4         | 7.6         | 13.7           | 13.3          | 14.1        | 9.6      | 71                   | 70                   | 65                   | 56                   | 51                   |
| 31   | Mexico       | 11.7         | 9.0         | 12.5           | 11.8          | 11.0        | 14.6     | 71                   | 68                   | 67                   | 65                   | 64                   |
| 32   | Oman         | 14.5         | 14.1        | 10.9           | 13.8          | 14.1        | 3.0      | 70                   | 69                   | 65                   | 66                   | 63                   |
| 33   | Ethiopia     | 9.9          | 9.7         | 12.6           | 10.4          | 12.1        | 15.6     | 70                   | 69                   | 66                   | 66                   | 65                   |
| 34   | Tunisia      | 12.4         | 13.2        | 10.1           | 12.6          | 13.8        | 8.1      | 70                   | 69                   | 67                   | 66                   | 67                   |
| 35   | DRC          | 8.0          | 7.9         | 12.6           | 10.8          | 14.5        | 16.1     | 70                   | 67                   | 67                   | 66                   | 64                   |
| 36   | Bhutan       | 13.2         | 13.2        | 12.3           | 14.1          | 14.2        | 2.2      | 69                   | 68                   | 66                   | 67                   | 64                   |
| 37   | Mozambique   | 9.3          | 8.5         | 13.9           | 8.4           | 12.5        | 15.9     | 68                   | 68                   | 68                   | 65                   | 63                   |
| 38   | Kazakhstan   | 13.3         | 11.6        | 12.2           | 12.8          | 14.2        | 4.3      | 68                   | 65                   | 65                   | 64                   | 64                   |
| 39   | Tajikistan   | 14.1         | 12.7        | 12.7           | 13.2          | 13.7        | 1.9      | 68                   | 66                   | 66                   | 65                   | 66                   |
| 40   | Egypt        | 12.7         | 13.7        | 12.1           | 12.4          | 10.9        | 6.3      | 68                   | 68                   | 68                   | 71                   | 75                   |
| 41   | Qatar        | 14.2         | 14.2        | 10.5           | 13.2          | 14.4        | 0.7      | 67                   | 67                   | 68                   | 74                   | 67                   |
| 42   | Comoros      | 12.7         | 14.0        | 11.2           | 12.4          | 14.2        | 2.6      | 67                   | 66                   | 66                   | 63                   | 62                   |
| 43   | Cameroon     | 8.8          | 7.6         | 12.6           | 8.4           | 13.1        | 16.1     | 67                   | 66                   | 65                   | 65                   | 64                   |
| 44   | Vietnam      | 10.8         | 9.5         | 12.2           | 14.1          | 14.1        | 5.9      | 67                   | 68                   | 70                   | 71                   | 72                   |
| 45   | Turkey       | 13.0         | 11.7        | 11.7           | 13.2          | 11.5        | 5.4      | 67                   | 64                   | 66                   | 65                   | 69                   |
| 46   | Colombia     | 11.0         | 7.9         | 12.7           | 11.5          | 10.5        | 12.6     | 66                   | 68                   | 71                   | 68                   | 67                   |
| 47   | Kyrgyzstan   | 13.5         | 10.3        | 11.7           | 11.4          | 12.4        | 6.9      | 66                   | 59                   | 59                   | 58                   | 58                   |
| 48   | Brunei       | 14.8         | 14.8        | 10.8           | 10.8          | 14.0        | 0.6      | 66                   | 66                   | 65                   | 64                   | 64                   |
| 49   | Chad         | 11.0         | 8.2         | 10.2           | 9.9           | 10.3        | 15.9     | 65                   | 61                   | 58                   | 55                   | 53                   |
| 50   | Jordan       | 12.9         | 14.3        | 10.4           | 12.2          | 12.8        | 2.4      | 65                   | 65                   | 65                   | 66                   | 64                   |

## World Watch List 2025 – Ranks 51-78

| Rank | Country                 | Private life | Family life | Community life | National life | Church life | Violence | Total Score WWL 2025 | Total Score WWL 2024 | Total Score WWL 2023 | Total Score WWL 2022 | Total Score WWL 2021 |
|------|-------------------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|----------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 51   | Malaysia                | 12.8         | 13.7        | 11.7           | 12.4          | 11.2        | 3.0      | 65                   | 64                   | 66                   | 63                   | 63                   |
| 52   | Azerbaijan              | 13.3         | 10.2        | 9.6            | 12.2          | 13.7        | 5.6      | 65                   | 60                   | 59                   | 60                   | 56                   |
| 53   | Kenya                   | 10.3         | 9.2         | 11.4           | 8.0           | 11.5        | 13.9     | 64                   | 63                   | 64                   | 63                   | 62                   |
| 54   | Nepal                   | 12.2         | 10.6        | 9.5            | 12.6          | 12.3        | 5.9      | 63                   | 62                   | 61                   | 64                   | 66                   |
| 55   | Tanzania                | 9.3          | 10.8        | 10.3           | 8.6           | 8.7         | 15.4     | 63                   | 62                   | 63                   | 61                   | 58                   |
| 56   | Russian Federation      | 12.7         | 7.9         | 10.7           | 13.1          | 14.1        | 4.4      | 63                   | 58                   | 57                   | 56                   | 57                   |
| 57   | Djibouti                | 12.3         | 12.6        | 12.7           | 10.1          | 12.1        | 1.7      | 61                   | 61                   | 60                   | 59                   | 56                   |
| 58   | Kuwait                  | 13.1         | 13.6        | 9.4            | 12.0          | 12.2        | 0.9      | 61                   | 61                   | 64                   | 64                   | 63                   |
| 59   | Indonesia               | 10.9         | 11.9        | 10.9           | 11.6          | 10.2        | 5.7      | 61                   | 66                   | 68                   | 68                   | 63                   |
| 60   | UAE                     | 13.3         | 13.4        | 9.5            | 11.3          | 12.8        | 0.6      | 61                   | 61                   | 62                   | 62                   | 62                   |
| 61   | Sri Lanka               | 12.7         | 8.7         | 11.5           | 11.5          | 8.5         | 7.6      | 60                   | 60                   | 57                   | 63                   | 62                   |
| 62   | Palestinian Territories | 13.1         | 13.3        | 10.3           | 10.7          | 12.1        | 0.2      | 60                   | 60                   | 60                   | 59                   | 58                   |
| 63   | Burundi                 | 7.6          | 7.8         | 9.4            | 9.8           | 9.7         | 14.6     | 59                   | 57                   | 55                   | 52                   | 48                   |
| 64   | Rwanda                  | 9.4          | 7.7         | 9.0            | 10.4          | 12.1        | 9.4      | 58                   | 58                   | 57                   | 50                   | 42                   |
| 65   | Honduras                | 7.9          | 4.7         | 11.7           | 7.3           | 9.9         | 13.1     | 55                   | 55                   | 53                   | 48                   | 46                   |
| 66   | Togo                    | 9.2          | 6.7         | 10.4           | 7.1           | 11.5        | 9.3      | 54                   | 52                   | 49                   | 44                   | 43                   |
| 67   | Bahrain                 | 12.0         | 13.2        | 8.6            | 11.3          | 8.5         | 0.6      | 54                   | 55                   | 55                   | 57                   | 56                   |
| 68   | Guinea                  | 10.3         | 7.5         | 8.3            | 8.3           | 10.5        | 8.9      | 54                   | 52                   | 48                   | 43                   | 47                   |
| 69   | Ukraine                 | 6.8          | 5.0         | 7.8            | 12.5          | 13.5        | 7.2      | 53                   | 44                   | 37                   | 37                   | 34                   |
| 70   | Angola                  | 6.8          | 6.7         | 8.1            | 11.5          | 11.4        | 8.3      | 53                   | 52                   | 52                   | 51                   | 46                   |
| 71   | Venezuela               | 6.3          | 4.4         | 11.1           | 10.0          | 10.8        | 9.6      | 52                   | 53                   | 56                   | 51                   | 39                   |
| 72   | Uganda                  | 8.1          | 5.0         | 7.4            | 6.7           | 8.8         | 16.1     | 52                   | 52                   | 51                   | 48                   | 47                   |
| 73   | Ivory Coast             | 12.0         | 6.5         | 8.7            | 5.9           | 8.0         | 9.6      | 51                   | 44                   | 44                   | 42                   | 42                   |
| 74   | Lebanon                 | 11.5         | 10.1        | 7.0            | 6.2           | 6.7         | 7.2      | 49                   | 48                   | 40                   | 35                   | 34                   |
| 75   | Gambia                  | 8.3          | 8.2         | 8.9            | 8.8           | 8.9         | 4.4      | 48                   | 47                   | 44                   | 44                   | 43                   |
| 76   | South Sudan             | 5.7          | 4.4         | 7.0            | 6.3           | 8.1         | 15.6     | 47                   | 46                   | 46                   | 43                   | 43                   |

| Rank | Country     | Private life | Family life | Community life | National life | Church life | Violence | Total Score WWL 2025 | Total Score WWL 2024 | Total Score WWL 2023 | Total Score WWL 2022 | Total Score WWL 2021 |
|------|-------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|----------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 77   | Belarus     | 9.9          | 3.7         | 5.0            | 10.8          | 14.1        | 3.1      | 47                   | 46                   | 43                   | 33                   | 30                   |
| 78   | Philippines | 9.2          | 6.6         | 6.6            | 6.1           | 5.7         | 8.5      | 43                   | 40                   | 32                   | 34                   | 26                   |

## Copyright, sources and definitions

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- [Background country information](#) (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

These documents are the property of World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. They include data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and 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 end of each document under the heading “External links”. These documents may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © Open Doors International.

The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/>.

## Reporting period

The WWL 2025 reporting period was 1 October 2023 - 30 September 2024.

## Brief country details

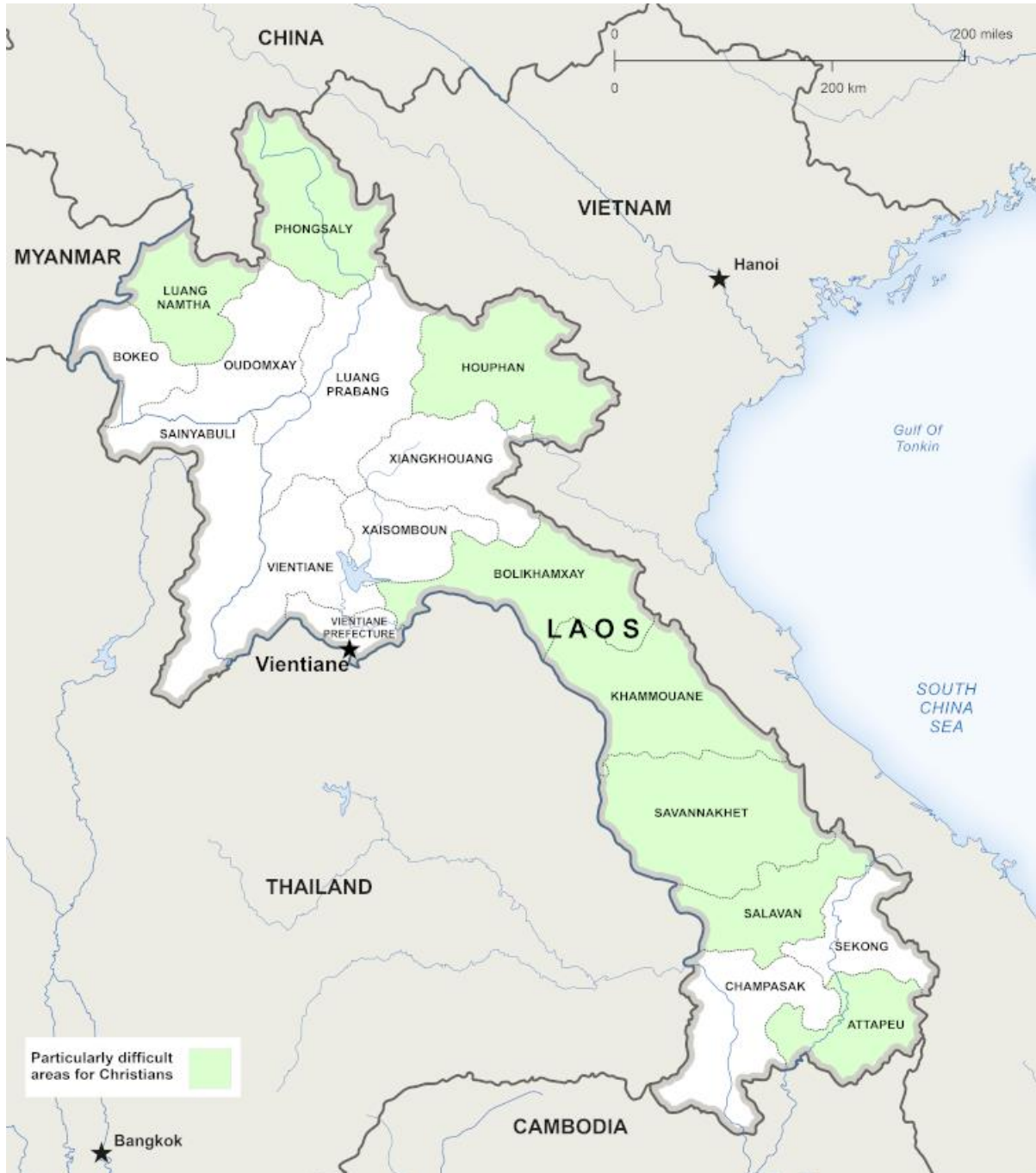
| Laos: Population (UN estimate for 2024) | Christians | Chr% |
|---|------------|------|
| 7,737,000                               | 224,000    | 2.9  |

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

| Laos: Religious context   | Number of adherents | %    |
|---|---------------------|------|
| Christians  | 224,000             | 2.9  |
| Muslim  | 9,400               | 0.1  |
| Hindu   | 6,400               | 0.1  |
| Buddhist  | 4,171,000           | 53.9 |
| Ethnic religionist  | 3,171,000           | 41.0 |
| Jewish  | 0                   | 0.0  |
| Bahai   | 18,800              | 0.2  |
| Atheist   | 23,500              | 0.3  |
| Agnostic  | 69,500              | 0.9  |
| Other   | 42,560              | 0.6  |
| <i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i> |                     |      |

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

## Map of country





## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

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

### Brief description of the persecution situation

Christians in Laos were shocked by the killing of a pastor in October 2022. While they are no strangers to being treated violently, such a killing has normally been a rare event. Nevertheless, further killings of Christians followed and in July 2024, a Khmu pastor and LEC provincial head of Oudomxay, was shot dead at his home after several warnings to stop his Christian activities. (See below: *Specific examples of violations*).

The usual levels of pressure faced are as follows: Communist authorities heavily monitor all religious activities, including those of the registered churches. As all gatherings have to be notified to the administration, house churches have to operate clandestinely as they are considered 'illegal gatherings'. Even an estimated 75% of all government-approved Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) congregations throughout the country do not have permanent church structures and consequently conduct worship services in homes. Converts to Christianity bear the brunt of rights violations. They are considered guilty of putting themselves outside the (Buddhist-animist) community and consequently face pressure and violence from their families, the local authorities and local religious leaders. This can lead to converts being expelled from their home village.

### Summary of international obligations and rights violations

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

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

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

- Christian communities and their activities are closely monitored by the authorities (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christians face discrimination in employment because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Christian children are forced to receive Buddhist religious education and to participate in religious ceremonies and festivals that are not in line with their religious beliefs (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- The state imposes strict limitations on Christian meetings that go beyond the internationally recognized and permitted limitations (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 21)
- Christians are attacked and expelled from their community for sharing about their faith (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- In addition, the [US State Department's 2023 Laos Country Report on Human Rights Practices](#) also notes the following: "Citizens traveling for religious purposes, including to minister, give advice, or visit other religious communities, were required to seek permission from central, provincial, district, and village authorities depending on where they were traveling, a process that could take several weeks. Christian groups reported problems obtaining permission to travel within the country, although many ignored the permit requirement." (ICCPR Art. 13)

## Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

In the WWL 2025 reporting period, a total of three Christians were killed for their faith. For security reasons, details can only be provided about one of these incidents (see below).

- **In 2023 and 2024:** In various places all over the country, houses and property of Christians were attacked, including essential livelihood items such as motorbikes or rice barns. At least 50 were expelled from their homes.
- **23 July 2024:** Pastor Thongkham Philavanh, a Khmu Pastor and LEC provincial head of Oudomxay, was [shot dead](#) at his home. According to local Christians, Pastor Thongkham was closely monitored by the authorities and had been warned several times to stop his "Christian activities" (Morning Star News, 29 July 2024).
- **22 June 2024:** In Tahae village, Xaibouathong District, Khammouane province, six Christians were [arrested](#), including a pastor, while they were preparing to hold a church service (Christian Post, 28 June 2024).
- **February 2024:** In Kaleum Vanke village, Xonboury District, Savannakhet province, village authorities [stopped](#) a house church service, burned Bibles and demanded the church to be closed (Radio Free Asia - RFA, 6 February 2024).
- **December 2023/January 2024:** At least seven Christians were arrested for building and leading house churches - for security reasons no details can be provided.
- **1 October 2023:** In Khampou village, Assaphone District, Savannakhet province, local authorities [disrupted](#) a church service and ordered the closure of the church (Morning Star News, 3 October 2023).

## 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 who face pressure, for example, through police monitoring.

### **Historical Christian communities**

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

### **Converts to Christianity**

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

### **Non-traditional Christian communities**

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

## Areas where Christians face most difficulties

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

## Position on the World Watch List

| Laos: World Watch List | Points | WWL Rank |
|------------------------|--------|----------|
| WWL 2025               | 74     | 22       |
| WWL 2024               | 75     | 21       |
| WWL 2023               | 68     | 31       |
| WWL 2022               | 69     | 26       |
| WWL 2021               | 71     | 22       |

After an unprecedented leap of 6.6 points in WWL 2024 (due to killings), there has now been a drop of 1 point in overall score. This drop was caused by the violence score falling from 11.3 points in WWL 2024 to 9.8 points. In contrast, there was a very slight increase in average pressure with increases in pressure from family and communities being of particular note.

## Persecution engines

| Laos: Persecution engines               | Abbreviation | Level of influence |
|---|--------------|--------------------|
| Islamic oppression                      | IO           | Not at all         |
| Religious nationalism                   | RN           | Medium             |
| Ethno-religious hostility               | ERH          | Not at all         |
| Clan oppression                         | CO           | Very strong        |
| Christian denominational protectionism  | CDP          | Weak               |
| Communist and post-Communist oppression | CPCO         | Very strong        |
| Secular intolerance                     | SI           | Not at all         |
| Dictatorial paranoia                    | DPA          | Strong             |
| Organized corruption and crime          | OCC          | Not at all         |

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

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

Laos is one of the five remaining Marxist-Leninist countries in the world; it staunchly sticks to Communist ideology and as such is strictly opposed to any influence deemed foreign or Western. In order to keep control, the Communist Party puts enormous pressure on society, including the small Christian minority. Per Communist definition, state authorities have a negative view of Christians, but

Christianity is nevertheless recognized as one of the four official religions, although it is seen as a Western ideology that challenges Communism. Despite all training to the contrary (See below: *Persecution pattern*), *Communist oppression* still occurs, especially at the provincial and district levels. One country expert observed that the Communist Party at a national level deliberately slows the growth of the Christian Church by turning a blind eye to the persecution of Christians at a local level. The Lao government controls all information, including newspapers and radio. The state pressure, apart from being monitored, is most strongly felt at the provincial and village level of leadership. The Communist Party - rather than a single ruling politician - will however do everything necessary to stay in power. Christians therefore should stay within tacitly understood guidelines and there are limits not to be crossed if Christians want to avoid negative reactions from officials. Local authorities often make use of society's hostile attitude towards Christians (most pronounced when there are visible signs of growth) to justify acting against them.

### **Clan oppression (Very strong)**

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

### **Religious nationalism - Buddhist (Medium)**

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

## Drivers of persecution

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

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

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

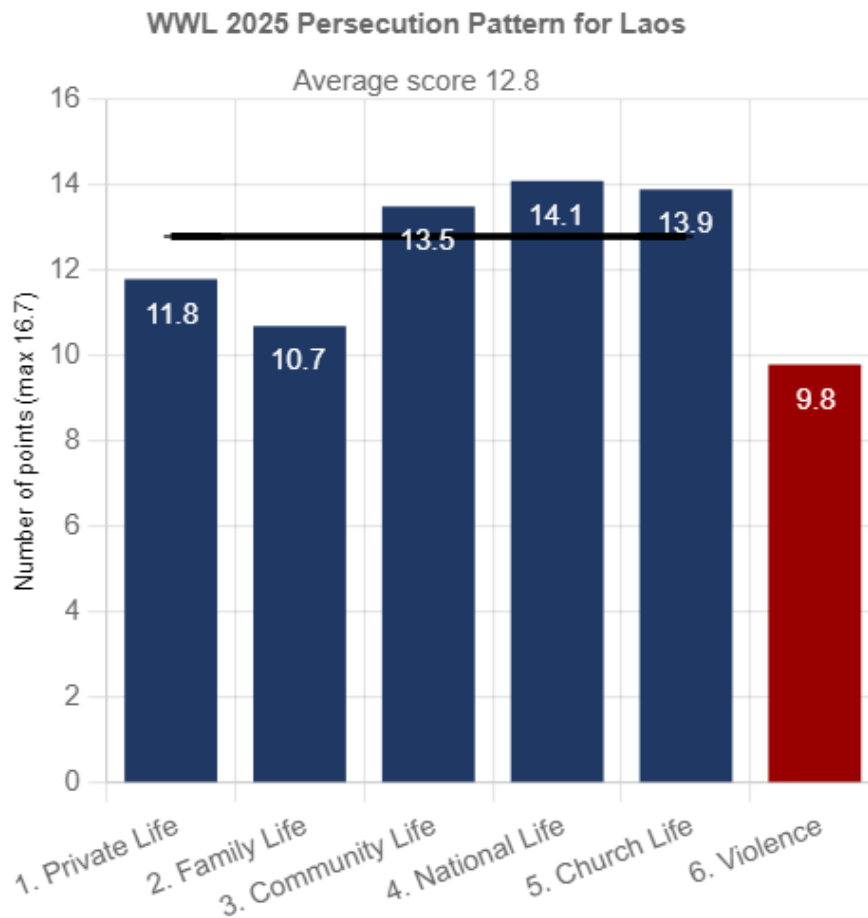
- **Government officials (Strong):** The rights of Christians are regularly violated by the Communist government authorities - most often at the provincial and local levels - as the Christian faith is seen as disturbing the communal peace in a village. The main motive behind this driver is to keep absolute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

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

#### **Drivers of Clan oppression and Religious nationalism - Buddhist**

- **Extended family (Very strong):** Converts to Christianity experience persecution from their own family on a very frequent basis. The decision to stop following customary animistic rites has far-reaching consequences and puts converts outside a closely-knit society, especially as Laos is predominantly rural and the culture is one of honor and shame. Family members are also known to cooperate with other drivers, e.g. village chiefs, to bring converts back to their old beliefs. Converts are put under pressure by their village communities as well.
- **Ethnic group leaders and Non-Christian religious leaders (Very strong and Strong):** Often, persecution against converts is stirred up by local ethnic group leaders and religious leaders. This has occurred in a number of incidents in collusion with village chiefs, who have the role of protecting the tribe's norms and traditions. Christians are seen as disturbing the peace in the village and as endangering the whole community. Consequently, they are put under pressure to give up their 'foreign' faith and, if this strategy does not succeed, they can be expelled from the village. This is done to preserve their tribal culture and ultimately their authority in their tribe.
- **Ordinary 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 2025 Persecution pattern for Laos shows:

- The average pressure on Christians over all *Spheres of life* rose very slightly to 12.8 points.
- Pressure is strongest in the *National and Church spheres* (both at an extreme level), closely followed by the *Community sphere* (at a very high level). Pressure on converts is especially acute in the *Private and Community spheres*, whereas all Christians face strong pressure in the *National and Church spheres*. The pressure in the two latter spheres has decreased since the central government has been carrying out a training program for officials serving local authorities on how to guarantee freedom of religion and belief. Although more consequences on the ground need to be seen, this program has already had some positive effect.
- The violence score decreased from 11.3 points to 9.8 points in WWL 2025. Whilst the score decreased from the WWL 2024 period it remains higher than previous reporting periods, illustrating that persecution in Laos can turn very violent beyond expelling Christians from a village, especially when churches are growing and/or are established in new areas.



## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

*In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2025 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://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/>.*

### 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)***

It is potentially dangerous for Christians to discuss their faith with others outside their family as this holds the risk of being reported to the police or local authorities. Christians, especially in the villages, are therefore very reluctant to share their faith even with non-Christian family members. There have been many cases in the WWL 2025 reporting period where Christians have been expelled from their villages because of their faith. In other places, Christians were warned by the police to stop mentioning their faith in conversations or were ostracized by their communities. In one location, Christians reported that they had been fined for sharing their Christian faith with others. All discussions about one's faith can be interpreted as attempts at (forced) conversion, which is illegal in Laos, leading Christians to 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, harassed, displaced and socially excluded for following a 'foreign' belief. They face being disowned and can be told to leave their village. Many Lao believe they are protected by *phi* (spirits). Family and community members are often afraid that a convert is angering the spirits and pressure on new converts to renounce their faith is high. Additional pressure often comes from the local authorities, sometimes with support of the police, who have an interest in keeping the peace in the village. Sometimes converts go to the provincial capitals where they still face opposition, but avoid immediate family pressures. Church leaders are also warned and have been threatened when the number of Christian believers in their area grows.

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

Whilst there are risks to Christians meeting across Laos the risks are much greater in rural areas. As all Christian gatherings are seen as being potentially dangerous by the authorities, every meeting needs to be approved by local officials, who regularly 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. Families have even been known to forbid their Christian family members from leaving the house. As Christians are closely watched, meetings with others are always noted and visits from Christians coming from outside

the village are even more difficult. Meeting with fellow Christians is less difficult in the cities. However, when Christian leaders visit fellow believers in some provinces, they prefer to do so during the evening hours, when less prying eyes are watching and it is safer to meet.

### ***Block 1 - Additional information***

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

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

### **Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere**

#### ***Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (3.75 points)***

Baptisms are one of the most visible signs of a growing church and of Christians cutting ties with their old beliefs. They are therefore 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 the LEC is not able carry out baptisms freely throughout the country and so baptisms often proceed under a veil of secrecy. One respondent shared: "Baptisms are often conducted either in house churches or in nearby rivers, but always in secret. Christians would not be permitted to carry out baptisms if the authorities were aware."

In addition to secrecy, churches use the lack of religious literacy and the fact that many authorities and non-Christians do not understand the religious significance of baptisms to their advantage. One Christian explained: "They think we are just swimming in the river, so we don't explain the meaning of what we are doing." Despite precautions, not all baptisms remain undiscovered. In one instance in the WWL 2025 reporting period, village leaders reported a baptism in a nearby river, prompting police intervention. Although no charges were filed against those involved, similar incidents in the past have led to arrests and have fueled tensions in rural communities.

#### ***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 and told by teachers that they must practice such rituals at home if they wish to receive good grades. In a recent development, one country expert reported that urban schools now even have Buddhist instruction as part of the curriculum.

Children of Christian families have been denied admittance to some schools because of their faith; others were told that their studies were pointless since they were unlikely to find a job in the future if they remained Christians. Consequently, some have been denied the possibility of progressing to high school studies. Students are also accused of betraying their country to foreigners by adhering to a foreign religion, Christianity.

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

Issues surrounding Christian burials in Laos are widespread, particularly in rural areas, where cases of denied access to public cemeteries are frequently reported. Even in the capital, Vientiane, the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) avoids such conflicts by maintaining a designated burial ground in Thadindeng Village, approximately one hour from the city. According to local sources, Catholic communities in Vientiane have similarly purchased land to establish their own cemetery. These measures reflect the challenges Christians face in securing burial rights across the country.

In rural villages, the use of communal cemeteries by Christians is often prohibited by village leaders and residents due to animistic beliefs. Many fear that burying Christians in public cemeteries will anger the spirits, which are thought to bring illnesses or misfortune to the community. Christians are sometimes permitted to use village cemeteries, but only under specific conditions, such as paying additional fees and performing animistic rituals. This often includes sacrificing animals like pigs or buffaloes to appease the spirits, compelling Christians to participate in practices that conflict with their faith.

At Buddhist funerals, cremation is required to pacify the spirits, and Christians are often pressured to conform to these traditions. For those with Buddhist backgrounds, navigating these expectations can be particularly challenging.

***Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.25 points)***

Christian children in Laos experience widespread exclusion and discrimination in education, particularly in rural areas. Reports highlight numerous cases where Christian children are denied enrollment in schools because village chiefs refuse to sign necessary documents or school officials reject their applications outright. In some instances, Christian parents are pressured to renounce their faith to secure their children's right to education. A local worker from Sekong noted that as recently as October 2023, 12 children were refused school admission due to their religious affiliation.

Even when enrolled, Christian children often endure verbal abuse and social ostracism from peers and teachers. Christian children are regularly bullied and ridiculed, referred to as "children of the foreign religion" or mocked with shouts like, "Hey! Jesus people are coming!" One student recalled being told by a teacher that Christianity was undesirable because it originated from outsiders. In extreme cases, children are threatened with expulsion, denied opportunities for scholarships, or excluded from programs such as free school meals funded by international donors. According to one resident "The

World Bank supports the lunch program for children in the village, but our children can't access it because their parents are Christians."

Social exclusion extends beyond the classroom. In many communities, children from non-Christian families are discouraged from playing with their Christian peers due to fears they may be influenced to adopt Christianity. One student reported, "Parents of non-believing children tell them not to play with Christians because they are afraid they will become Christian too." Similar attitudes have been noted across other provinces. Discrimination also affects future prospects, with children being warned that being Christian will prevent them from finding employment, friends, or a spouse.

### **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)***

Christian communities across Laos experience persistent monitoring and surveillance by local authorities, village leaders and neighbors. In provinces like Luang Namtha, Phongsaly and Houphan in the north and Savannakhet and Attapeu in the south, the local authorities (especially village leaders) seem determined to control any Christian witness. Authorities view Christianity as a Western influence incompatible with Communist ideology and a potential threat to national unity. This perception has led to harassment, arrests and, in some cases, the eviction of Christians from their homes. One Christian explained: "The police visit us weekly to check if someone is helping Christians. Landlords have even asked us to move out to avoid issues with the authorities."

Some Christians suspect their phone calls and social media activities are being intercepted, though concrete evidence is difficult to obtain. One Christian explained: "The authorities seem to know our plans, including Bible studies and training sessions, as if they're monitoring everything." Church services are closely watched, with police officers—both in uniform and plainclothes—attending gatherings to issue warnings, photograph participants, and report back to superiors. In some cases, monitoring involves the active participation of local communities with neighbors and family members of Christians reporting activities to village chiefs or the police. One Christian noted: "We are constantly observed by neighbors who report everything to the authorities. We have to be very careful in what

we do." In other cases, surveillance involves secret police who disguise themselves as merchants or civilians to monitor Christians discreetly. Villagers frequently report the arrival of new faces in Christian gatherings, leading to increased attention from district and provincial authorities.

Despite these challenges, Christians continue to practice their faith under difficult circumstances. However, the constant scrutiny and interference significantly hinder their ability to gather, worship and conduct outreach activities freely.

***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.

Christians in Laos frequently face employment discrimination due to their faith, particularly in the public sector, where opportunities are often closed to believers. Government jobs are nearly unattainable for Christians, and those who convert after being employed risk dismissal or pressure to resign. A notable instance involved a Christian woman in Vientiane who was threatened with the loss of her pension if she continued to practice her faith. In the private sector, discrimination persists but is less overt. Hiring practices often rely on recommendations, and Christians are frequently excluded due to bias. Many employers, especially in rural areas, prefer Buddhists or animists, perceiving Christians as untrustworthy. This systemic exclusion forces some Christians to conceal their faith to retain employment or avoid abuse. For many Christians, these barriers result in limited options, compelling youth to seek work abroad in places like Thailand.

***Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (3.50 points)***

Christians in Laos often face significant pressure to participate in non-Christian religious ceremonies and community events, especially those rooted in Buddhist or animistic traditions. These ceremonies, such as rituals invoking spirits to ensure protection and balance, are deeply embedded in the cultural fabric. For example, tying a white thread around the wrist to ward off spirits is a common practice, but Christians typically refrain from doing this. Their refusal, however, is perceived as breaking communal harmony, leading to tensions with neighbors and local leaders.

In many villages, participation in annual feasts or contributions toward animistic or Buddhist ceremonies is mandatory. Christians who decline are often accused of sowing disunity or causing harm to the community, with some leaders going as far as cursing them to invoke fear. Christians have also reported being pressured to join spirit worship ceremonies, where drinking alcohol or consuming sacrificed food is expected. Refusing these demands often leads to hostility, social exclusion, and accusations of arrogance or a lack of community spirit.

These pressures extend to workplaces and schools, where collective ceremonies or offerings are expected of everyone. Again, Christians who resist are labeled as troublemakers or are told they are disrupting community harmony. Additionally, in some regions, Christians are forced to pay fees for village rituals or risk being expelled from their communities.

***Block 3.7: Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith. (3.50 points)***

Christians in Laos often face intense pressure from their communities to renounce their faith. This coercion comes in various forms, including verbal threats, social exclusion, physical assault, destruction of property, and expulsion from villages. Such tactics are designed to force Christians to return to animistic or Buddhist practices, which are seen as integral to community harmony. In some cases, village authorities directly intervene, threatening individuals and families with eviction or legal action unless they abandon their faith.

Christians frequently report being summoned by village leaders or committees to meetings where they are pressured to recant their Christian beliefs. In some instances, families or relatives cut ties, refusing to associate with or support Christian family members. The fear of community discord or angering spirits often drives this hostility, with non-Christians accusing believers of bringing misfortune to the village. Christians are sometimes excluded from communal activities, denied basic rights such as land use, or targeted with theft or property damage.

For new converts or isolated believers, the pressure is particularly severe. Reports include Christians being physically attacked by family members or ostracized for refusing to participate in traditional practices. Some individuals, unable to withstand the relentless persecution, have recanted their faith, while others remain steadfast despite threats of violence or hardship. Village chiefs and local authorities often lead these efforts, warning that Christians will face social isolation, economic difficulties, or supernatural harm if they do not conform. Despite the challenges, many Christians continue to affirm their faith.

**Block 3 - Additional information**

Christians in Laos face systemic discrimination and financial exploitation by local authorities. They are seen as being divergent to the norm and are frequently visited by the police. They are fined for holding meetings deemed "illegal," with their property sometimes confiscated. Pastors and believers often endure extortion, including inflated fees for government documents or annual payments demanded by village chiefs simply "for being Christians." Church leaders are heavily monitored and frequently interrogated. They are often required to submit detailed reports and statistics about their congregation multiple times a year. Some Christians, especially leaders and those suspected of being active in missionary work, need to request a permit for almost every step they take. They are also expected to make a report about trips they have made, even when it was only to the neighboring village.

Christian students also face educational discrimination, with limited access to government scholarships, as their faith excludes them from future civil service roles. A country expert shared that "many Christian students who want to pursue university studies do not have an equal chance to access scholarships offered by the government because of their faith. This is because most of the scholarships are given to those who will work later on with the government, and because they are Christians, the government won't allow them to work as civil servants."

## Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

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

The Constitution of Laos provides for the right to freedom of religion, including the choice to believe or not believe in any faith, and guarantees equality for all citizens regardless of their beliefs. Articles 9 and 43 emphasize respect for all religions, particularly Buddhism, and uphold religious freedom in principle. However, in practice, these constitutional protections are undermined by decrees such as Decree 315, which designates the government as the ultimate authority over religious activities. This decree requires prior government approval for practices such as conversions, preaching, or building places of worship, creating significant barriers for religious freedom.

While Decree 315 theoretically outlines guidelines for religious practices, its implementation is often inconsistent, particularly in rural areas where officials may be unaware of its provisions. Local authorities frequently misuse their power, denying permission for religious activities or subjecting Christians to harassment and persecution. This results in a lack of freedom for Christians to carry out ministries or hold gatherings, pushing many activities underground. Even when Christians comply with the required procedures, such as seeking permits to build churches, they are often met with arbitrary rejections or subsequent persecution.

Whilst it is reported that there are efforts underway to address these issues, little has changed on the ground. For example, the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have initiated educational campaigns for local officials, aiming to align their practices with international commitments, such as Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, progress has been slow, and religious freedom in Laos remains heavily restricted, with Christians continuing to face significant obstacles to practicing their faith openly and freely.

### ***Block 4.6: Christians have been barred from public office, or has promotion been hindered for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)***

Christians in Laos face significant barriers in accessing and advancing in public or government positions, with their faith often serving as a direct impediment. In many cases, Christians are completely excluded from applying for government roles or participating in local governance, such as being part of the village committee. Instances of Christians being denied leadership opportunities, including village chief elections, are common, reflecting a systemic bias against Christians in public office. Even when Christians secure government jobs, they often face discrimination, with delayed promotion, stagnant salaries, or outright dismissal if their faith becomes known.

Conversion to Christianity can lead to punitive measures, such as demotion, salary cuts, or exclusion from benefits, unless individuals agree to recant their faith. Some Christians, despite years of service and qualifications, are denied promotions or recognition solely due to their religious beliefs. For others, persistent hostility or pressure to renounce their faith forces them to resign. This environment discourages Christians from pursuing or retaining positions in government and public institutions, perpetuating their marginalization and limiting their ability to influence societal structures.

***Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (3.25 points)***

Political parties other than the Communist Party are banned, leaving no space for explicitly Christian political movements or advocacy. Consequently, Christian civil society is constrained, unable to function openly or advocate for religious freedom. 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. They cannot openly express religious affiliations or engage in evangelization. The 2018 Decree on Association abolished the autonomy of NGOs, requiring pre-approval for activities, government monitoring of funding sources, and legal registration. Unregistered groups risk prosecution, and the decree prohibits activities that could "threaten local traditions," a provision often used to suppress Christian work in tribal areas.

Christian organizations are hindered in displaying religious symbols, conducting ministry, and openly associating with their faith. For example, Christian NGOs such as World Vision face rules against hiring only Christian workers, and their operations are limited to humanitarian activities, excluding any form of evangelism. Several provinces reject Christian-affiliated projects outright, fearing the spread of the gospel, and Christian organizations operating in these areas must avoid any religious messaging.

***Block 4 - Additional information***

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

**Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere**

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

Church activities in Laos are heavily monitored, with authorities using a range of tactics to surveil and control religious gatherings. Secret police and local officials frequently attend services, record attendance and document sermons. While services in recognized churches in urban areas are often allowed to proceed, in rural areas, house churches and unregistered groups face significant interference with officials claiming that house churches are not legitimate places of worship, forcing believers to meet in fields or other private spaces. Local officials frequently visit these groups, demanding they cease worship or imposing fines and issuing threats, such as expulsion from villages or destruction of homes. The severity of interference also varies from region to region. Some areas,



particularly tribal regions like Sekong and Salavan provinces, experience intense persecution, including threats and active disruption of worship. Here, authorities regularly disrupt services by questioning leaders, photographing attendees, and using local informants to report on activities. Even when gatherings proceed, the presence of police or military officials creates a climate of fear and intimidation. Christmas celebrations and other non-Sunday activities are particularly targeted, with many churches being barred from holding such events. Foreign missionaries and visitors to churches are also closely monitored, reflecting government concerns about foreign influence.

***Block 5.2: It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government. (4.00 points)***

Registering churches or obtaining legal status for Christian groups in Laos remains an arduous and often impossible task with applications ignored or denied outright. Christians across the country face significant obstacles from various levels of government, with excessive bureaucratic demands, high fees, and outright refusals. In rural areas, the situation is particularly dire. Christians often resort to worshiping in private homes or even on farms, as registering house churches is virtually impossible. Some church leaders no longer pursue registration, given the insurmountable hurdles and fear of persecution. Even in urban areas, the process involves extensive questioning, including intrusive inquiries about funding sources and potential foreign influence.

Obtaining permits to build churches is equally challenging. The requirements under Decree 315, such as proof of land ownership in the name of a recognized religious group and meeting strict government conditions, are often unattainable. Even when Christians attempt to comply, their applications are delayed or rejected. Authorities also demand substantial service fees, such as 70 million kip, without guaranteeing approval. In some areas, village chiefs actively block registration, declaring that Christians are not legitimate members of their communities.

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

Churches in Laos face significant restrictions when it comes to openly integrating converts. Conversion is actively discouraged by local authorities and communities, with police frequently reminding churches not to proselytize or expand their membership. In many areas, especially in the northern provinces, district officials require churches to submit regular reports on attendance, creating an environment of fear and surveillance. A common sentiment among Christians is that growth in membership often leads to increased scrutiny and persecution, with authorities interpreting it as illegal proselytization. In rural areas, such as Sekong, Attapeu, and Champasak, converts are closely monitored, with authorities treating conversions as a threat to village unity or government control. For house churches, integrating converts is even more challenging, as they operate under the constant threat of raids, questioning, or closure. Many churches resort to covert methods to introduce new adherents to the faith, holding secret gatherings or worshiping behind closed doors to protect both converts and existing members. In some cases, sharing the gospel or integrating converts openly has led to arrests or threats of imprisonment. These challenges leave churches in a precarious position, striving to balance their faith with the need to navigate an oppressive environment.

***Block 5.13: Churches have been hindered in importing Christian materials from abroad. (3.50 points)***

Christian materials from abroad can only be imported in a limited and centralized way. Decree 315 regulates the importation and printing of religious materials and production of books, documents, icons and symbols of various religions. The Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism and the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) must approve religious texts or other materials before they are imported. MOHA may require religious groups to certify that the imported materials are truly representative of their respective religions, address issues of authenticity, and ensure imported materials comport with values and practices in the country. The law prohibits the import or export of unapproved printed or electronic religious materials. The government has to approve all Christian books and other materials that are to be used and sold in the country. There is one Christian bookstore in the capital Vientiane which also sells a few foreign books.

***Block 5 - Additional Information***

Communities often hinder churches from setting up and building places of worship. At times, the community uses force to stop church construction. Detailed administrative requirements must be fulfilled before a church can be built and/or registered. As a country expert said: "It seems that at every level the government will make very steep requirements in order to allow a church to be built. As indicated by many, the requirements are impossible to fulfill. This is likely due to the authorities trying to make sure that churches don't have the capacity to grow." This is especially the case in the northern provinces (for instance in Luang Namtha and Phongsaly). In some rural areas, a local officer is even required to attend worship in order to monitor the Christians. Pastors have been frequently targeted for arbitrary arrests, detention and abduction. The problems mainly lie with the regional and city governments. In the WWL 2025 reporting period, there was a case where Bibles were confiscated at the border with Thailand.

## Violence

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

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

Possible reasons for this may be:

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

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

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

### **3. The use of symbolic numbers:**

- *In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10\*, 100\* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10\* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100\* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000\* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000\*, 100,000\* and 1,000,000\*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWL chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.*

| Laos: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire   | WWL 2025 | WWL 2024 |
|---|----------|----------|
| 6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?   | 3        | 4        |
| 6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons? | 18       | 25       |
| 6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?   | 62       | 65       |
| 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?   | 0        | 2        |
| 6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?   | 0        | 0        |
| 6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?   | 0        | 0        |
| 6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?   | 0        | 0        |
| 6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?   | 196      | 156      |
| 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?                               | 16       | 78       |
| 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?   | 2        | 22       |
| 6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?  | 93       | 159      |
| 6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?   | 0        | 5        |

For the WWL 2025 reporting period:

- **Christians killed:** In the reporting period, three Christians were killed for their faith, including the killing of Pastor Thongkham Philavanh in July 2024 (see above: *Specific examples of violations*).
- **Christians attacked:** At least 93 Christians were expelled from their communities, almost all also included attacks against Christians (see above: *Specific examples of violations*).
- **Christians arrested:** More than 60 Christians were detained/arrested.

- **Churches attacked:** There have been reports of at least 18 churches being attacked and some destroyed. For security reasons, no further details can be given.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** Farming land was taken away from some Christians, effectively cutting them and their families off from their source of livelihood. Homes and crops were destroyed (see above: *Specific examples of violations*).

## 5 Year trends

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

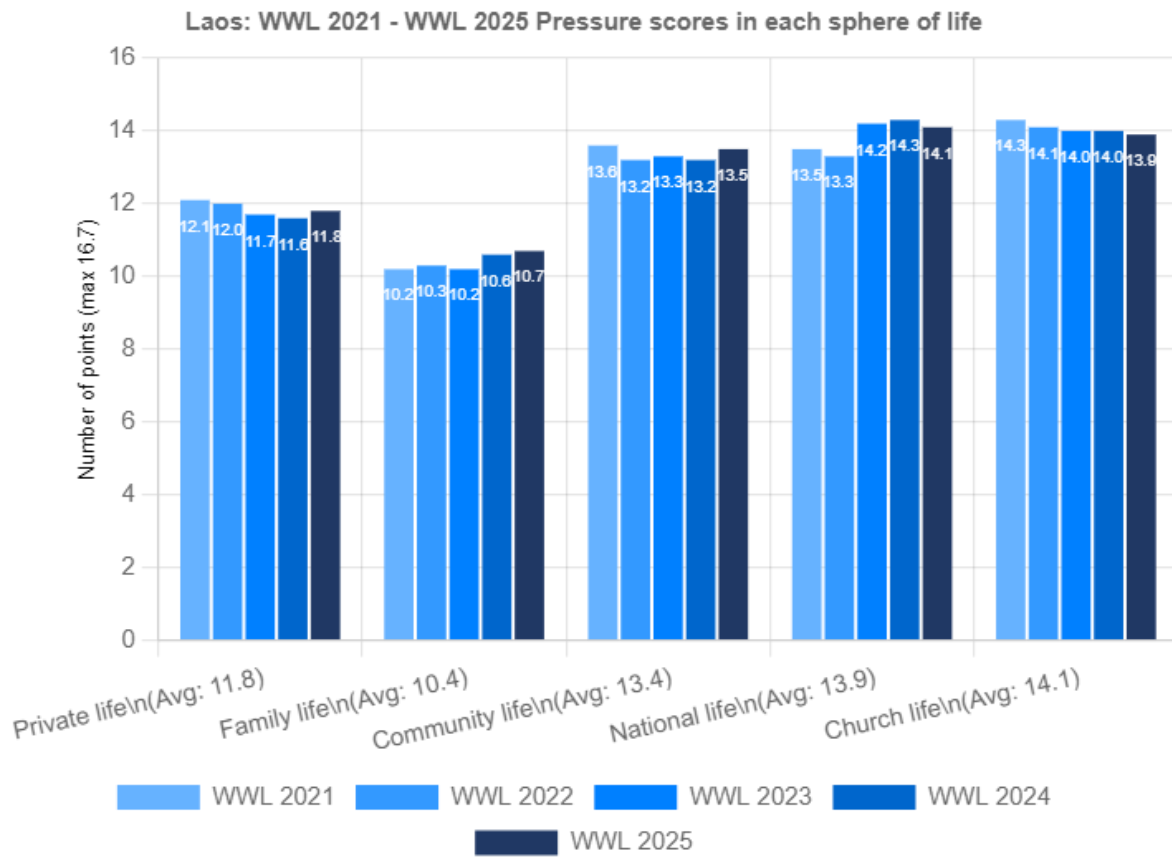
### 5 Year trends: Average pressure

| Laos: WWL 2021 - WWL 2025 | Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life |
|---------------------------|---|
| 2025                      | 12.8                                    |
| 2024                      | 12.7                                    |
| 2023                      | 12.7                                    |
| 2022                      | 12.6                                    |
| 2021                      | 12.7                                    |

The table above shows that the average level of pressure on Christians has been stable within the 'very high' range of 12.6 - 12.8 points throughout the last 5 WWL reporting periods.

### 5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

In WWL 2021, the overall level of pressure decreased in the score for *National life*, reflecting the beginning of local authority training on freedom of religion and belief. So far, these training sessions did not bear tangible fruit and pressure in the *National sphere* rose again from WWL 2023 onwards to an extreme level again. The levels of pressure in *Private, Family and Community life* show that families and local neighborhoods of converts continue to prioritize ancestor and spirit worship with these spheres scoring higher in the 2025 reporting period than in the previous three years.



**5 Year trends: Violence against Christians**



The chart above shows that in the period WWL 2021-WWL 2023, the violence score was steadily falling. But in WWL 2024, the score suddenly more than doubled, caused by the unprecedented killing of four Christians and many more reports about churches closed, Christians expelled and other violence committed. Whilst the WWL 2025 score has fallen somewhat, it remains very high at 9.8 points.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

| Laos | <b>Female Pressure Points</b><br><b>Most frequently recorded PPs: WWL 2019 - WWL 2024</b> |
|------|---|
|      | Violence – physical   |

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

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

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

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

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

| Laos | Male Pressure Points<br>Most frequently recorded PPs: WWL 2019 - WWL 2024  |
|------|--|
|      | Economic harassment via business/job/work access<br>Economic harassment via fines<br>Imprisonment by government<br>Violence – physical |

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

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

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

### Persecution of other religious minorities

Taking up the subject of Decree 315, which was issued in 2016 and is applicable to all religions, the US State Department reports (IRFR 2023 Laos):

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



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

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

## Trends Summary

### 1) Strengthened ideology and Dictatorial paranoia

Since the April 2023 shooting of activist Anousa "Jack" Luangsuphom, political repression in Laos continues to reflect a climate of paranoia, particularly against those perceived as critics of the government or proponents of foreign ideologies. While violence against Christians by national authorities remains rare, there are emerging patterns of concern.

In rural areas, Christians face increased monitoring from local authorities. Reports from 2024 suggest continued cases of forced evictions and social exclusion, particularly for Christians in ethnic minority communities. These actions are often justified by accusations of "destabilizing traditional culture" or spreading "foreign religions." Although these incidents tend to occur at the local level, they reflect the broader central government policy of ideological conformity, which prioritizes state-sponsored Buddhism and indigenous animist practices over Christian or other minority religious beliefs.

The [2024 World Press Freedom Index](#) places Laos rather low in the ranking at #153 out of 180 countries. The lack of transparency and suppression of civil liberties exacerbates risks for Christians and other religious minorities, as there are few channels to report abuse or seek redress. Furthermore, the continued criminalization of unregistered religious gatherings adds to Christians' challenges in freely practicing their faith.

### 2) Growing dependency on China

China's economic and political influence over Laos has deepened in 2024, with tangible implications for religious freedom. The Laotian government's reliance on Chinese loans and infrastructure projects, such as the high-speed rail network and energy sector investments, further entrenches China's soft power in the country. China's growing influence indirectly affects religious freedom, as the Chinese government promotes a model of tight control over religious expression, often mirrored by Laotian authorities.

Recent developments in Laos' integration with Yunnan province, especially in the energy sector, have sparked concerns about Chinese-style policies influencing Laos' internal governance. China's active role in promoting atheism and Communist ideology creates pressure on Laos to marginalize non-state-approved religions, including Christianity.

Environmental and social consequences of this dependency also disproportionately affect minority communities, many of which are Christian. Deforestation, land grabs, and displacement caused by

Chinese-backed agricultural and infrastructure projects have disrupted local communities' livelihoods, forcing some to relocate to areas with stricter governmental oversight and higher levels of persecution.

The combination of heightened ideological control and growing dependency on China suggests that the situation for Christians in Laos is likely to remain precarious. Localized incidents of persecution, particularly in ethnic minority regions, are likely to persist, and the government's focus on strengthening ideological conformity could exacerbate these challenges. International advocacy efforts remain critical but face significant obstacles given Laos' tight alignment with China's policies and its closed political system.

## Further useful reports

Further background information per country and a selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

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

## External Links

- Copyright, sources and definitions: Background country information - <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-background/>
- 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>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: US State Department's 2023 Laos Country Report on Human Rights Practices - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/laos/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: shot dead - <https://mailchi.mp/morningstarnews.org/unknown-assailants-shoot-pastor-dead-in-laos?e=887168c072>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: arrested - <https://www.christianpost.com/news/6-christians-arrested-in-laos-during-prayer-meeting.html>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: stopped - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/church-02062024163724.html>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: disrupted - <https://mailchi.mp/morningstarnews.org/local-officials-in-laos-stop-worship-expel-christians>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: La Croix, 26 May 2021 - <https://international.la-croix.com/news/world/lao-women-trafficked-into-china-under-false-pretenses/14368>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: RFA, 12 December 2022 - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/pastor-12122022104112.html>
- Trends Summary: 2024 World Press Freedom Index - <https://rsf.org/en/country/laos>