

WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

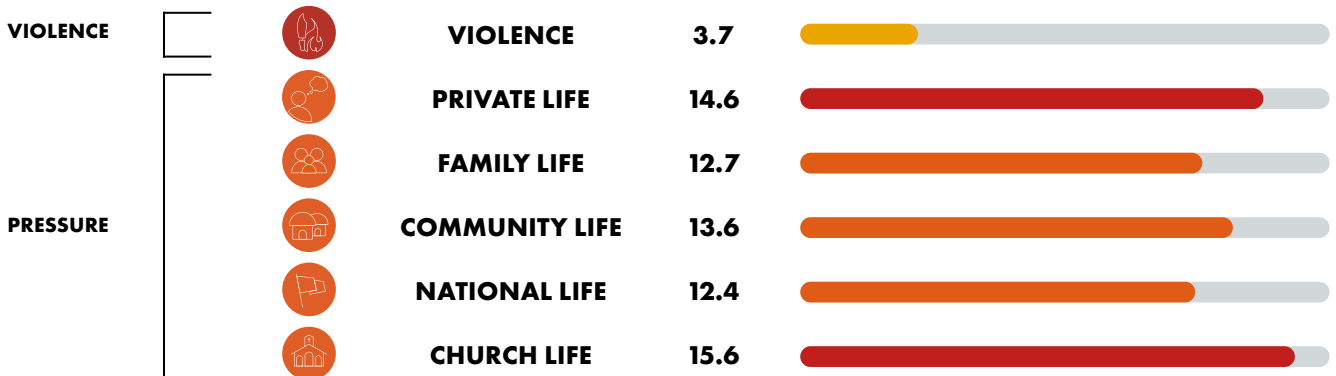
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

UZBEKISTAN

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
25



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



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

Key findings

All Christians in Uzbekistan face varying degrees of pressure and violence based on their faith identity. Russian Orthodox churches encounter minimal interference from authorities as they rarely engage with the indigenous Uzbek population. However, Muslim-background converts face severe violations from state actors, family members, and local communities, with persecution intensifying in rural areas compared to urban centers. Unregistered churches are particularly vulnerable to police raids, arbitrary arrests, threats, and financial penalties.

The state's dual approach, secular governance with tight religious control, creates a complex environment where Christians must navigate both government restrictions and social hostility, especially in conservative regions where Islamic and clan identity remain strong.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev

POPULATION

36,159,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

395,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Authoritarian Presidential Republic



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Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	395,000	1.1
Muslims	34,394,000	95.1
Agnostics/Atheists	1,269,000	3.5
Others	101,000	0.3
	Total	100%

Source²

Uzbekistan remains a highly authoritarian state under President Mirziyoyev's control since 2016, with opposition movements and independent media effectively banned. Following a May 2023 referendum, constitutional changes now allow Mirziyoyev to remain in office until 2040, further consolidating his power ([RFE/RL, 3 May 2023](#)).

The 2023 constitutional revision defines Uzbekistan as a "secular state," yet religious freedom is severely restricted. The legal framework criminalizes unregistered religious activity, requires state approval for all religious literature, prohibits proselytism, and mandates complex registration processes while banning private religious education ([US State Department, IRFR 2023 Uzbekistan](#)).

In 2024-2025, conditions deteriorated further with the Oliy Majlis (Parliament) adopting legislation that penalizes parents who allow children to receive unauthorized religious education ([USCIRF 2025](#)).

[Uzbekistan](#)). The government systematically blocks registration applications from religious communities, with unregistered Protestant groups facing police surveillance and pressure to recruit informers ([Forum 18, 26 April 2024](#)).

Despite Uzbekistan's predominant Sunni Muslim population (95.1%), the secular government—influenced by 70 years of Soviet atheism—maintains tight control over Islamic practice. Citizens tend to follow Islamic cultural traditions rather than strict religious observance. The officially recognized Christian minority (1.1%) remains vulnerable under these governmental controls, with the Russian Orthodox Church, Independent groups, and the Armenian Apostolic Church comprising the largest Christian denominations. (World Christian Database, accessed April 2025).

How the situation varies by region

Government pressure on Christians remains consistent throughout Uzbekistan, with state surveillance and restrictions enforced nationwide. However, family and community persecution of converts varies significantly by region, with rural areas experiencing substantially higher levels of hostility than urban centers. The Fergana Valley demonstrates particularly severe levels of persecution, where traditional Islamic values and clan structures remain strongest.

¹ Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

² Other refers to all the rest to make up 100%: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

Uzbekistan's authoritarian regime views independent religious activities as potential threats to state control and national stability. The government permits only state-approved religious institutions to operate legally, with all others subject to surveillance, infiltration and suppression. According to [USCIRF 2025 Uzbekistan](#), authorities systematically brand Protestant groups as "extremists" or "foreign agents," alleging that their ultimate goal is to destabilize the political system.

ISLAMIC OPPRESSION BLENDED WITH CLAN OPPRESSION

If indigenous (Muslim) citizens convert to Christianity, they are likely to experience pressure and occasionally physical violence from their families and the local community to force them to return to their former faith. Some converts are locked up by their families, beaten and even expelled from their communities. Local Islamic leaders preach against them, adding pressure. As a result, most converts will do their best to hide their faith.



Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

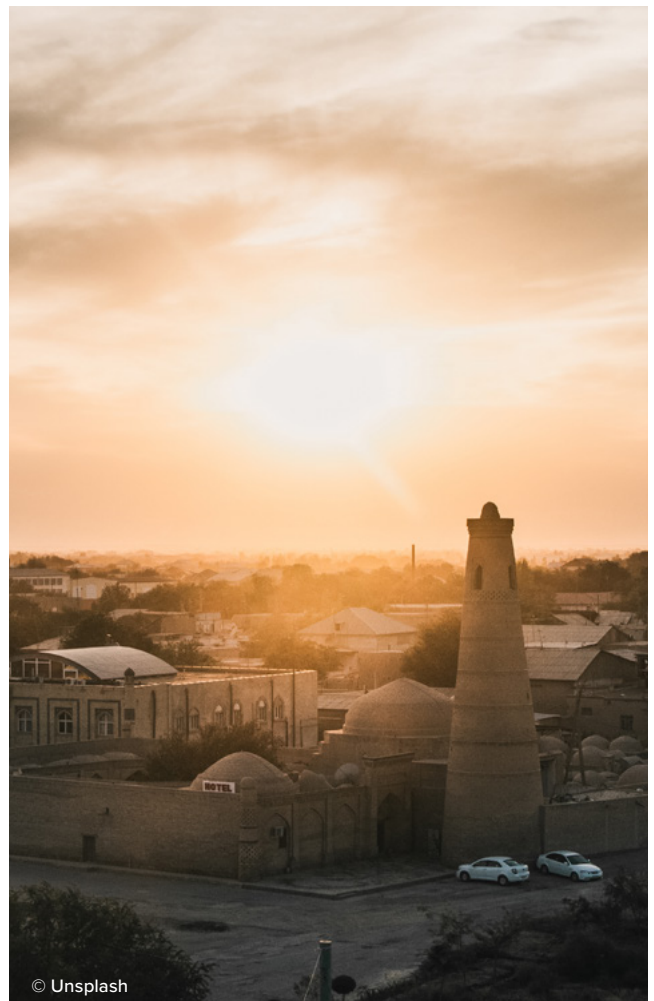
The Russian Orthodox Church largely complies with governmental limitations and experiences minimal interference. While services are monitored, congregations meet openly without fear of arrest, though importing material remains restricted.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Muslim-background converts face the most severe violations, experiencing dual persecution from state authorities and family/community members.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Unregistered Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal groups constitute the second most targeted category, regularly experiencing raids, arbitrary detentions, threats, and punitive fines for religious activities deemed "illegal" under Uzbek law.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Traditional Islamic culture and patriarchal norms place women lower than men and subservient within the family context. Women are not free to choose their own religion and face severe opposition to conversion. Incarceration by a convert's family remains a common and socially accepted form of putting female converts under pressure. Access to social networks, specifically Christian networks, is restricted in the hope that the convert will return to Islam. Abduction and forced marriage are risks, with sexual violence (including within marriage) often unacknowledged and normalized. Shame and stigma prevent many from ever reporting crimes against them.

Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Forced marriage
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – physical
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Church leaders are common targets for rights violations, particularly those of unregistered churches. They can be fined, detained, denied exit visas or put under house arrest. This creates a ripple effect of fear through their congregations. In addition, male church leaders face barriers in being trained, as there is only one small seminary, and training online is difficult; if training resources are discovered, the individual will be fined. Christian men continually face inequality, job losses, persistent state monitoring and pressures within the context of mandatory military service. Male converts face verbal, physical and psychological abuse.

Male typical pressure points:

- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Economic harassment via fines
- Imprisonment by government
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Travel bans/restrictions on movement
- Violence – physical
- Violence – verbal



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WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	25	73
2025	25	73
2024	25	71
2023	21	71
2022	21	71

The overall score remains unchanged, although the violence score did decrease. The ranking also is unchanged from WWL 2025. Average pressure slightly increased to 13.8 points. The pressure scores went slightly up in Community and Church life, remained stable in Private, Family and National life. Muslim families, friends and villagers exert pressure on converts in particular, while the government imposes many restrictions on church activities and Christians belonging to non-registered churches have suffered from police raids, threats, arrests and fines.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **December 2024:** On 25 April 2024, two buildings under construction belonging to Urgench Council of Churches Baptists were ordered to be destroyed. However, the demolition was halted after protests, until 4 December 2024, when a bulldozer arrived and the church buildings were completely demolished. ([Forum 18, 6 December 2024](#))
- **August 2025:** Three families were forced to leave their homes. ([Voice of the Martyrs, 27 August 2025](#))

WWL Year	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians killed	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians' private property damaged or confiscated
2026	2	0	36	5
2025	2	1	10*	10*

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



PRIVATE LIFE

Converts put themselves at great risk when discussing their Christian faith with anyone, including close family members. The government classifies such conversations as “proselytism,” punishable by up to three years’ imprisonment under the criminal code. Digital surveillance has intensified, with authorities monitoring online activities for religious content. A March 2025 amendment to the Administrative Code increased penalties for possession of unauthorized religious materials, with fines now reaching 50 times the minimum monthly wage. Discovered converts regularly face family rejection, community ostracism, and potential government detention.

FAMILY LIFE

Christian families navigate intense pressure from multiple directions. The Muslim majority in society pressures children of converts to participate in Islamic education and practices, while state educational institutions impose secular anti-religious propaganda. The 2024 legislation penalizing parents for unauthorized religious education places Christian parents in an impossible position, unable to provide religious instruction at home without risk, yet prevented from accessing church-based youth programs, which remain prohibited. Converts report that extended families often monitor children’s statements and activities for evidence of Christian influence, creating environments of constant surveillance and fear.

COMMUNITY LIFE

Christians experience dual persecution from living in an Islamic society and the secular state. Converts face comprehensive monitoring by family members,

neighbors, local officials, and police, with increased stop-and-search actions reported in 2024-2025. Local communities frequently report suspected Christian activities to authorities, resulting in raids, detentions, and fines. According to Forum 18 (April 2025), Protestant groups experienced a 32% increase in community-initiated harassment compared to the previous reporting period, with local mahalla (neighborhood) committees actively participating in identifying and reporting Christians to authorities.

NATIONAL LIFE

Uzbekistan’s legal framework systematically restricts religious freedom by requiring religious registration while making the process practically impossible for many groups. Unregistered religious activity remains criminalized, with authorities employing increasingly sophisticated surveillance methods to detect gatherings. The law strictly controls religious literature extending to censorship of online content. Home raids continued throughout 2024-2025, resulting in confiscations, fines that average 10-30 times the monthly minimum wage, corrective labor sentences, and occasional imprisonment.

CHURCH LIFE

All youth-oriented religious activities, including Sunday schools, remain strictly prohibited. The criminalization of proselytism (punishable by up to three years’ imprisonment) makes accepting converts dangerous for churches. Registration requirements became more stringent in 2024, with new regulations mandating minimum membership numbers impossible for small congregations to achieve. Churches must submit all materials for government approval.



International obligations & rights violated

Uzbekistan has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under the following international treaties:

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

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

- Christians are killed for their faith (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Churches from non-traditional denominations are raided, services disrupted, and attendees are arbitrarily arrested (ICCPR Arts. 9; 18 and 21)
- Ownership and consultation of religious literature is severely restricted beyond international permitted limitations (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Christians and their activities are monitored by the authorities and the surrounding community (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christian female converts run the risk of being abducted and forcibly married to Muslim men (ICCPR Art. 23; CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art. 10)

Situation of other religious minorities

All religious groups experience heavy state surveillance and oppression. Jehovah's Witnesses face registration denials; Muslims practicing outside state-approved institutions remain targeted, with many imprisoned on vague "extremism" charges related to peaceful religious activities. In June 2024, Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov ordered the demolition of over 400 unregistered mosques and prayer spaces for conversion to commercial use ([USCIRF 2025 Uzbekistan](#)). Jewish and Bahai communities also experience restrictions on materials and gatherings.



Open Doors in Uzbekistan

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

- Literature distribution
- Prayer support
- Biblical training
- Children/youth training
- Women's ministry
- Presence ministry
- Social and medical ministry
- Vocational training and micro credit
- Socio-economic development projects, such as rehabilitation centers



ABOUT THIS DOSSIER

- The content of this Country Dossier is based on detailed analysis carried out by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. This dossier may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2026 Open Doors International.
- All 50 Country Dossiers – along with the latest update of WWL Methodology – can be accessed [here](#).
- The WWL 2026 reporting period was 01 October 2024 - 30 September 2025.

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.