

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2023

From Nigeria to North Korea, from Egypt to Afghanistan key partners report on the pressures Christians are likely to face this year

Nigerians protest against the violence perpetrated by extremist groups



AFRICA



NIGERIA

'Nigeria, from every indication, is at a pivotal point in its history,' said our partner. 'The election in 2023 will determine whether the nation grows as an entity or continues to disintegrate.'

Such is their growing confidence in winning that northern Islamic political groups and fundamentalists have fielded both presidential and vice-presidential candidates.

If successful they may then 'push for an

Islamic state as has been championed by radical groups such as Boko Haram, Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA), Ansaru and militias devastating Christian communities in central Nigeria.'

The call by southern regional ethnic groups for cessation is yet another growing development.

Overshadowing these challenges are the persistent attacks against predominantly Christian communities in the Middle Belt region. In 2022 alone it was reported that more than 6,000 Christians were killed and around 17 villages destroyed by Fulani militias. There are currently more than two million internally displaced people.

'Kidnapping for ransom has now become the major money earner for the terrorist groups while victims of rape and people living with disabilities due to the attacks continue to grow among the Christian communities. Hundreds of thousands of children in these Christian villages are either unable to go to school or cannot access any good education,' said our partner.



Boko Haram is one of the militant forces pushing for Nigeria to become an Islamic state

He added that the elections in February and March (for president, governorships and membership of the assembly and senate) may well determine whether the agitating groups support nationhood or pursue independence either peacefully or violently.

Even if the Labour Party presidential candidate, who is a Christian, wins he may not be able to govern effectively because of the grip the northern political elite have on the country.

'The call to restructure the Nigerian constitution becomes the key factor for the nation. Unless Nigeria is structured and the constitution rewritten to give every region its autonomy and identity, minority tribes, who are

*predominantly Christian, will continue to be persecuted and to live as slaves and second-class citizens to the north with an agenda to make the nation an Islamic state. **Whichever way this goes, Nigeria is a nation in need of prayers and a miracle.***

PRAY

- For peaceful elections in 2023 and political developments that would help to bring an end to the violence against Christians.
- For protection for Christian communities across Nigeria.

ERITREA

The Eritrean Government continued to arrest Christians throughout 2022. Among those detained in the summer were a group of 17 men and women and eight children. This followed a number of detentions in the capital Asmara at the end of May as well as the jailing in March of 29 Christians who had attended a prayer meeting raided by the police.

Release International partner Dr Berhane Asmelash believes that, unless there is a genuine change in government policy, these arrests and detentions will continue in 2023.



Berhane Asmelash

Evangelical church leaders continue to be a target for arrest

and persecution because they are authority figures in society and therefore perceived as a threat by the state. The number of believers currently in prison is estimated to be about 250.

PRAY

- For all the Christians currently detained, often in harsh conditions. Some have been behind bars for more than a decade. Pray that more would be released in 2023.
- For an end to the targeting and arrest of evangelical believers especially pastors and church leaders as part of wider religious freedom reform.

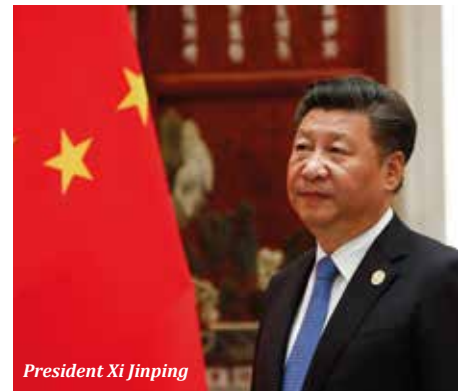
EASTERN ASIA



CHINA

Unregistered churches have been prevented from meeting as groups, so congregations get together in small numbers in apartments. There are many reports of leaders and members of unregistered churches being taken in for questioning and an increasing number have faced charges related to cults, to being corrupt with money and illegal religious activity. Many young people, teachers and parents have been told that religion will harm their education and they should report anyone involved in such activity. There are reports of job offers being withdrawn if applicants express Christian beliefs.

Persecution is increasing with repeated official messages stating



President Xi Jinping

that Christians are unpatriotic and their beliefs outdated and Western in origin. Harassment of individuals in or outside churches has increased as attitudes have hardened.

‘The government under Xi Jinping wants to control everything, and currently Christianity is not fully under its control (as it sees it),’ says our partner. ‘Christianity is being pictured as unacceptable to an atheistic, communist country, rather than an acceptable but minority belief.’

It is anticipated that Christians will come under even greater pressure in 2023 with more calls for them to demonstrate unwavering allegiance to Xi Jinping by rejecting Christianity (and all religion).

PRAY

- Pray for Christians who have been arrested and imprisoned because of their refusal to deny Christ.
- Pray for the best Christian resources to reach pastors and leaders so that they are equipped to lead their congregations especially if these are divided into small groups.





INDIA

Pressure continues to mount on Christians from Hindu extremist groups who appear increasingly emboldened by the dominance of the nation's right-wing Hindu Government.

Reports of violent attacks on pastors and other Christians continued throughout the past year, as did the progress of anti-conversion laws. In September Karnataka became the latest state to introduce a 'conversion' law. While it is claimed they legislate against forced conversion, in practice they often open the door to legal opposition to gospel ministry.

The actions of various Hindu nationalist groups appear to have increased since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 2014. The National Solidarity Forum and Evangelical Fellowship of India noted around 500 reported attacks on Christians in 2021, with about 200 recorded in the first five months of 2022. Sadly many fear that trend could continue into 2023. Release International partners are becoming increasingly aware of long-term serious medical needs among those who have been badly beaten. They also highlight a growing need for Bibles, particularly in rural areas.

PRAY

- For protection for Christians, especially pastors and church leaders, and courage to persevere in an increasingly hostile environment.
- For an end to conversion laws.

NORTH KOREA

North Korean citizens (particularly those in provinces that border China) are becoming increasingly exposed to foreign influence through illegal trade connections and smuggled media devices.

'Due to this, the North Korean Government continues to be concerned about foreign powers interfering in North Korean society,' said Dr Eric Foley, CEO of our associate ministry Voice of the Martyrs Korea.

In order to combat foreign influence, Pyongyang invests in developing events and media that fuel a

The state continues to educate the public on the 'dangers' of clergy, missionaries and Bibles

nationalistic spirit yet still appeal to the changing tastes of the masses. Because Christianity is viewed through the lens of history as a tool which Western powers have used to colonise other countries, the state continues to educate the public on the 'dangers' of clergy, missionaries and Bibles.

Due to increasing apprehension toward unregulated Christianity on the part of the Chinese Government as well, North Korean defector believers living in China are facing increased persecution and regulation. Beijing has implemented surveillance and

restriction measures on text messages containing Christian content.

Owing to the spread of coronavirus in North Korea, Beijing is beginning to crack down on defectors illegally residing in China and shows signs of sending them back over the border, where they are generally interrogated over whether they have attended church, interacted with missionaries or received Bibles.

PRAY

- For North Koreans who have heard the gospel in China and are being forcibly repatriated to keep the faith and be a faithful witness in North Korea.
- Pray for defectors who continue to minister to other North Koreans in China; that God would continue to provide for their needs and for the needs of defector believers in South Korea.

'Thank you for praying for and supporting North Korean underground Christians. Please be encouraged to know that they are praying for you, too,' said Dr Foley.





Zafar Bhatti

PAKISTAN

Religious minorities in Pakistan are continuing to face frequent attacks and threats, including blasphemy charges, targeted killings, mob violence, forced conversions and destruction of worship places and graves. After the release of Asia Bibi, the Christian imprisoned on blasphemy charges, in 2018, extremist religious parties started to pressurise government institutions to enforce the blasphemy laws. Pakistan's judiciary is also

'The pressure of the blasphemy law and political discrimination continues and we have to face it every year'

under pressure as witnessed by the amending of a life sentence for blasphemy-accused Christian Zafar Bhatti to the death sentence.

Our partner reported an armed attack on a Christian colony in Balochistan in August in which three children were among those seriously injured. Sadly, it seems that, even after such incidents, the Government has taken little action.

'Pakistan is an Islamic state. The pressure of the blasphemy law and political discrimination continues and we have to face it every year,' said our partner.

PRAY

- That peace conferences between Christians and Muslims will reduce the pressure that many believers experience.

- For protection for believers especially those from non-Christian backgrounds.

'We thank Release International supporters for their prayers and passionate love for us. They always fill the gaps in our ministry and encourage us.'

Another partner also highlighted the fear of physical attack, which is heightened at Christmas and Easter, as well as the day-to-day discrimination and intimidation such as in education and employment. It added: *'The introduction of a heavily Islamic national education curriculum has caused a lot of confusion. It diminishes the status of non-Muslims.'*

AFGHANISTAN

The effects of the Taliban takeover in August 2021 were felt much more keenly in 2022 as its hardline stance became ever more apparent and violence increased. (For example, the denial of women's education and rights, and seemingly turning a blind eye to attacks on the minority Shia.) This hardline attitude flows over to those who are 'different' and may be Christian, both local and foreign.

Many Afghan Christians have fled the country or are living temporarily in neighbouring countries such as Pakistan or Iran, while those who remain have gone into hiding. Once again, the church has been decimated in Afghanistan while a massive earthquake, economic woes and an impending famine continue to

exacerbate hardships for all.

Some national Christian groups, working quietly, have been able to help Afghan refugees; and some believing Afghans in Pakistan have found an unexpected though cautious freedom in their faith. However, even here the threat of persecution is never far from their minds.

Christians in Afghanistan and the northern areas of Pakistan will continue to run the risk of discovery. Muslim-background believers (MBBs) especially have the constant fear of discovery, betrayal, exposure and attack.

PRAY

- For converts who experience isolation and lack of Christian fellowship and struggle to access the Bible. They cannot share their faith with others for fear of reprisal, while the pressure to return to their former faith communities can be intense.
- Pray that the ban on Afghans travelling to neighbouring countries is lifted.

Our partner said: *'Release's financial and prayer support is part of the reason why our ministry is able to continue and develop. The level of suffering in the region is huge... yet in the midst of it all, our ministry is flourishing — and seeing an increase in responses. This has to be answered prayer. Thank you for your support and prayers, especially for the vulnerable seekers and believers we minister to.'*

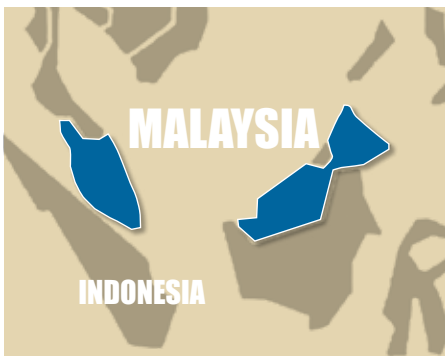


The presence of the Taliban has caused many to flee Afghanistan

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2023



SOUTH-EAST ASIA



MALAYSIA

Due to Covid restrictions mainstream churches have suffered as the Government has kept them closed. Mosques became operational with full capacity long before churches were allowed to re-open, and with only 50 per cent capacity. Some who have spoken out about this imbalance have been promptly silenced with warnings of imprisonment.

'Persecution is definitely increasing as the Government plans to form an Islamic nation and wants to be ruled by sharia (Islamic law) only,' said our

partner. In order to do this, it needs to achieve a majority of Muslims in the country, thus there is a drive to convert people to Islam.

Elections are due to be held in 2023 and, depending on the result, significant changes are expected within the coming years. *'Churches need to be more aware of the agenda, but out of fear and various other reasons they have turned a blind eye to the situation, while at the same time avoiding fellowship with anyone coming to the Lord from an Islamic background.'*

PRAY

- Pray for more open houses for fellowship for those who cannot go to public places of worship.

Our partner said: *'Release has been and always will be part of our Malaysian fellowship as its concern and love for the persecuted church are so real. Not only are their prayers and support essential, but so is their personal presence on a regular basis.'*

'To all its supporters, we want you to know that your support is a blessing to many, and many have found the strength to worship our living God, just with knowing that they are not forgotten or abandoned.'

MIDDLE EAST



IRAN

During 2022 the authorities particularly targeted those who were involved in any kind of ministry.

'Whilst we give thanks to the Lord that there has not been a wave of persecution against those who have converted (even though some of these can face opposition from family or harassment in their work or studies) there is obviously a campaign to try to stop the spread of Christianity, to arrest those who are leading house churches

and those involved in evangelism and teaching,' said our partner.

'Persecution is on the increase because the authorities are aware of the growth in the number of converts and house churches and are determined to stem this. In fact their overall goal is to exterminate the Persian-speaking church and only allow the Christian minority groups to operate. Longer prison sentences are being given by the courts to some Christian workers and over the past months two key Armenian leaders have each been sentenced to ten years and others to sentences varying between six and eight years.'

'There is no doubt that the Government of Iran is upset and concerned that disillusioned Muslims are becoming Christians.'

Our partner added that converts, particularly leaders, were likely to face increasing pressures in 2023. The fear of persecution has also led to an exodus of some believers from Iran, which is likely to continue this coming year.

PRAY

- For protection of house churches. In view of security pressures, believers

are meeting in smaller groups than before. Pray against a spirit of fear, and that they will know God's peace and presence. Christian satellite programmes and social media are a lifeline for many.

- Pray for those in prison because of their ministry, especially those with lengthy sentences. May they know God's presence and stay strong in their faithful witness.

EGYPT

Besides the subtle day-to-day persecution that Christians face in the community, workplaces, schools and universities in various parts of the country, persecution is always most intense in Upper Egypt. Any conflict between Christians and Muslims most often concludes with the blame (and any consequences) placed on the Christians. As a result they may have to leave their homes at short notice or face dire consequences.

Persecution was at its height between 2011 and 2013 during the post-revolution season and Muslim Brotherhood (MB) regime. Following the latter, persecution decreased

significantly because it was no longer endorsed by the Government. However, persecution remains constant among the impoverished, under-educated parts of Upper Egypt since it is deeply ingrained in the minds and culture of many extremist groups there.

'The pressures Christians face are likely to continue. The Russia-Ukraine crisis is currently the biggest source of economic/financial pressure, particularly on the already very poor and on daily wage earners who go for days and weeks without any income,' said our partner.

PRAY

- For the current economic crisis, which is taking a heavy toll on the poorest, many of whom are Christians.
- For safety for partner workers as they travel to meet and support persecuted believers.

'We are thankful that we were able to meet the needs of the most desperately impoverished families this year because of the stability of funds provided by Release International. Thank you!'

VIEW FROM THE TOP

CEOs from our associate ministries highlight particular areas of concern for 2023

Cole Richards, head of Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) in the US, points to the rise of Islamic extremism across Africa as a major cause for concern this coming year.

'Even in countries where Christians are in the majority they are experiencing persecution. Sadly that trend in places like Mozambique, Kenya, Cameroon and Uganda will continue in 2023.'

'Our work has increased sevenfold and even that doesn't meet the need!' he said.

The latest conflict in Mozambique had been marked by tremendous violence with Christians suffering the worst. Thousands have been killed or driven from their homes. In the Central African Republic and Ethiopia tens of thousands of families have been displaced and that number is set to rise.

His counterpart in Canada, Floyd Brobbel, pinpoints three areas of concern: the growing number of attacks against Christians in Nigeria, the underground church in Afghanistan and the dangers believers face in southern Mexico.

'Persecution used to be predominantly in the north of Nigeria but now it is spreading to the central and southern regions; there seems no clear resolution.'

'There is a small underground Christian community in Afghanistan but the Taliban will recognise when people no longer go to the mosques or take part in other Islamic activities so we expect an increase in persecution in the coming months.'

'As for Mexico, it is becoming increasingly dangerous. Persecution comes from four persecuting groups: indigenous/animist; Catholic/animist blend; Zapatistas and paramilitary drug groups. Animists are pressurising evangelicals to join their pagan festivals. If they refuse, they run the risk of losing their land and property and becoming nomads. There have been church burnings, arrests and even martyrdom.'

However, like Cole, Floyd finds cause for celebration not just in the numbers of people coming to faith in countries where there is severe persecution but also in non-religious developments such as the appointment of a Christian to the head of the Supreme Court in Egypt.

Tony Benjamin of VOM Australia shares that sense of optimism in regard to conversions in the Middle East and also in China, where he believes that President Xi will *'continue to squeeze the church and any ideology opposed to communism in 2023'*.

It seems that the next 12 months will be a significant period for large swathes of the church across the globe in which numbers will increase just as persecution intensifies.