

FINAL WWL 2019 COUNTRY DOSSIER

LAOS

LEVEL 3/EMBARGO

(Reporting period: 1 November 2017 – 31 October 2018)

Contents

| | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Introduction..... | 3 |
| Copyright Notice | 3 |
| Introduction..... | 3 |
| WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Laos..... | 4 |
| Link for general background information | 4 |
| Recent country history | 4 |
| The religious landscape | 4 |
| The political landscape | 4 |
| The socio-economic landscape | 5 |
| Concluding remarks..... | 5 |
| External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Laos | 6 |
| WWL 2019: Church History and Facts..... | 7 |
| How many Christians? | 7 |
| How did Christians get there?..... | 7 |
| What church networks exist today? | 7 |
| Religious context | 8 |
| Notes on the current situation..... | 8 |
| External Links - WWL 2019: Church History and Facts | 9 |
| WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile | 10 |
| Introduction..... | 10 |
| What type of persecution dominates? | 10 |
| Who is driving persecution?..... | 10 |
| What it results in | 10 |
| Violence | 11 |
| Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period | 11 |
| External Links - WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile | 11 |
| WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics | 12 |

Introduction..... 12

Position on World Watch List (WWL)..... 12

Persecution engines 12

Drivers of persecution 13

Context 14

Christian communities and how they are affected 14

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence 15

5 Year trends 18

Gender specific persecution..... 20

Persecution of other religious minorities 20

Future outlook..... 20

External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics 21

Additional Reports and Articles 22

 WWR in-depth reports 22

 Open Doors article(s) from the region 22

 World Watch Monitor news articles 22

 Recent country developments 22

Introduction

Copyright Notice

Introduction

| World Watch List Laos | Points | WWL Rank |
|-----------------------|--------|----------|
| WWL 2019 | 71 | 19 |
| WWL 2018 | 67 | 20 |
| WWL 2017 | 64 | 24 |
| WWL 2016 | 58 | 29 |
| WWL 2015 | 58 | 28 |

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country was among the fifty highest scoring countries (Top 50) in the WWL 2015-2019 reporting periods.

Please note: The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.

WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Laos

Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-15351898>

Recent country history

Laos was a French colony until 1953. A power struggle ensued until Communist forces overthrew the monarchy in 1975, heralding years of isolation. After the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, Laos began opening up to the world. Despite economic reforms, the country remains poor and heavily dependent on foreign aid.

In March 2016, Laos became chair of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) which brought the country into the international spotlight, but this did not lead to any additional openness. The ASEAN People's Forum - connecting civil society and human rights actors from across South-East Asia – is usually hosted by the country chairing ASEAN. However, in August 2016 it had to be held in East Timor instead, highlighting the fact that the Laotian government is not prepared to give civil society in general (nor a religious minority such as Christians in particular) any room to express their views. The country continues to come down very harshly on any perceived dissent (which includes Christian faith). On the other hand, Laos desperately needs development and economic growth, and foreign investment will need increasing openness. It is well on its way, as it is one of the [fastest growing economies](#) in the East Asian and Pacific region. However, this growth depends greatly on its big investor and neighbor, China.

The religious landscape

The country is still in the tight grip of the Communist Party and therefore religion is something authorities see as hostile. While Buddhism is accepted as being part of the country's heritage to a certain extent and the animist religions are seen as ineradicable superstitions, Christianity is seen as foreign, linked with Western values and hostile.

Laos is one of the few Theravada Buddhist countries in the world, following the oldest existing Buddhist tradition. But how does this ancient faith system fit in with the national leadership's Communist ideology? There is a close connection between society and the influence of Buddhism, temples and monks. Buddhist temples are not just religious centers; they also serve as focal points for community life, especially in rural areas, and most Buddhist men spend some time of their lives in a temple – ranging from a few days to longer periods of time. The religious goals of some Buddhist monks overlap with the political goals of the Communist party, namely to keep control of the country. The Communists' main goal is to preserve stability in the country and to keep the government secure. The predominant goal of many Buddhist monks is to preserve their respected role in society and to maintain their monopoly in religious matters and in political influence. This desire for preservation of power and position presents a lot of common ground for both sides.

The political landscape

The Communist Party does not plan any democratic reforms. Being influenced by two bigger neighbors which are still Communist (China and Vietnam), Laos is looking to them for examples on how to keep society in check. Terms like "rule of law" or "human rights" do not play an important role in the country. Especially local and provincial leaders are slow to implement laws from the central government. The Communist Party continues to stick to its traditional patterns of ruling, namely

nepotism and corruption when it comes to the economy and suppression as far as political and social matters are concerned.

Buddhist authorities and leaders of ethnic religions often get along well with the Communist authorities because of overlapping interests. Since nearly half of the population belongs to ethnic minorities, keeping a close watch on them is important for the government. The broad anchoring of Buddhism in the whole country is a helpful means of keeping control. This is the deeper reason why Laos is less shaken by ethnic, religious or social unrest than some of its neighboring countries are - there is simply no room for expressing different views or for staging demonstrations due to the draconian control of the government. Buddhism serves as a connecting hub for the whole of society and it is closely linked with nationalism. Animistic practices also have a very strong influence in society, especially in rural areas, and serve as a source of pressure on Christians: People not taking part in animistic practices, exclude themselves from the community and will be taught what it means to be an outsider.

The socio-economic landscape

Laos is one of the poorest countries in the world. Its economy suffers from networks favoring either extended party members' families or their close friends; regional descent is also very important. Without access to these networks, it is difficult to get good jobs or to obtain administrative positions. Corruption in Laos is ubiquitous and people know about it, but cannot do anything to counter it. Moreover, as there is no free press in the country, there is no public pressure pushing for accountability. The transfer of power within the Communist Party which took place in 2016 (and the accompanying "elections" for parliament in March 2016) did not change anything in this respect.

Despite the considerable economic growth of the country since the economic liberalization of 1986, when the Communist Party decentralized control on the economy and encouraged the start of private enterprises, Laos is still one of the least developed countries in the world. However, it may be promoted to a higher category in 2024, the United Nations ECOSOC [announced](#). There remains an enormous gap between development in urban and in rural areas, the latter being the least developed (especially in terms of infrastructure like electricity, water, sanitation, etc.). As the income gap grows, so does the potential for social unrest. Due to rampant corruption and cronyism (i.e. partiality to long-standing friends), only the country's leadership benefits from economic gains and most citizens are left in poverty, bad health conditions and with a growing inflation rate.

Traditional Lao culture (Buddhism) perceives it to be natural for wealth and power to be concentrated in the hands of the ruling elite by virtue of their karma. This karma determines their birth and social status. The means to improve your own status is to build up a network based on obligation and loyalty, given in exchange for protection and assistance in times of need. Given these underlying social values, there is little possibility of improvements being made in undeveloped regions or even of an open protest; after all, what happens is determined by one's karma and has to be accepted.

Concluding remarks

Apart from the social challenges and the good news of a well-developing economy, one factor remains of paramount importance: Laos is dependent on its larger neighbors Vietnam and China. As a land-locked country, it needs access to the sea and relies particularly on China for major infrastructure projects. This dependence has several implications:

- 1) For the country's economy it means that the government can only partly influence major decisions and is indebted to its neighbors.

2) For the political future (i.e. concerning civil rights and freedom of religion), it means that Laos is unlikely to open up for religious minorities anytime soon, especially as both are following a policy of an increasing emphasis on Communist ideology.

3) After the country's chairmanship of ASEAN, Laos is ignored again by international observers and the plight of persecuted Christians in Laos continues largely unnoticed, as is the situation of human rights in general.

External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Laos

- Recent country history: fastest growing economies
<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lao>
- The socio-economic landscape: announced
<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/lc-04182018152511.html>

WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

| Pop 2018 | Christians | Chr% |
|-----------|------------|------|
| 6,961,000 | 225,000 | 3.2 |

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

How did Christians get there?

Roman Catholic missionaries (Jesuits from Vietnam) made several attempts to enter Laotian territory from 1630 onwards. However, not until the Paris Foreign Mission Society entered the country in 1878, could a [mission station](#) at Ban Dorn Don (an island in the Mekong River) be established.

[Presbyterian Christians](#) established churches in Thailand (Siam) in the 1860s and Swedish and Swiss missionaries moved eastwards into Laos in 1890 and 1902 respectively. However, Protestantism did not spread until the Christian and Missionary Alliance entered Laos in 1948. The Khmer minority, dominated by the Lao majority, then began to respond positively as did other minority groups.

In the mid-1970s, the Communist regime started a campaign to eradicate the Christian minority - but failed.

What church networks exist today?

| Church networks: Laos | Christians | % |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------|
| Orthodox | 0 | 0.0 |
| Catholic | 45,600 | 20.3 |
| Protestant | 177,000 | 78.7 |
| Independent | 1,800 | 0.8 |
| Unaffiliated | 86 | 0.0 |
| Doubly-affiliated Christians | 0 | 0.0 |
| Total | 224,486 | 99.8 |
| <i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i> | | |
| Evangelical movement | 176,000 | 78.2 |
| Renewalist movement | 22,600 | 10.0 |

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. Roman Catholics: All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. Protestants: Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. Independents: Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). Unaffiliated Christians: Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. Doubly-affiliated Christians: Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. Evangelical movement: Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. Renewalist movement: Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

The Roman Catholic Church is present in the most populous five central and southern provinces and is generally able to work undisturbed. In April 2010 the official ordination of a Lao Catholic bishop took

place, and in May 2017 the first Laotian cardinal was announced. The Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) is officially recognized and consists of about 400 churches with around 100,000 believers.

Other Protestant groups are not able to get recognition or registration as the government requires that they become part of the LEC. Christian groups that are not recognized by the government, include Methodists, Church of Christ, Assemblies of God, Lutherans and Baptists. Official membership numbers are not available.

Christians make up 3.2% of the population, roughly two-thirds are Protestants and one third Catholics. A large proportion of Catholics have a Lao ethnic background, whereas most Protestants (mainly members of the Lao Evangelical Church) belong to ethnic minority groups such as Hmong and Khmu. Indeed, more than 50% of the total Christian population is from the Khmu tribe.

Religious context

| Religious Context: Laos | Numbers | % |
|-------------------------|-----------|------|
| Christians | 225,000 | 3.2 |
| Muslim | 8,000 | 0.1 |
| Hindu | 5,400 | 0.1 |
| Buddhist | 3,662,000 | 52.6 |
| Ethnoreligionist | 2,924,000 | 42.0 |
| Jewish | 0 | 0.0 |
| Bahai | 16,300 | 0.2 |
| Atheist | 20,300 | 0.3 |
| Agnostic | 62,700 | 0.9 |
| Other | 37,410 | 0.5 |

OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

According to WCD statistics, 52.6% of the population are Buddhist, mainly following the Theravada teachings. 42% adhere to ethnic religions (Chinese folk not included), basically related to their ethnic or tribal ancestry, and are similar to religions practiced in Thailand. Several folk traditions have been incorporated into Buddhism, so that the numbers given above should be understood as overlapping. Folk traditions for example venerate special places like rivers or trees, natural phenomena and include ancestral worship.

Notes on the current situation

- In general, there is more freedom of worship for Christians in urban areas than in rural areas. In rural areas Christians always run the risk of being disturbed, harassed or even imprisoned by local authorities. In larger cities Christians can find more room for activities as long as they do not disturb the peace. There are also reports of Christians from the ethnic minorities being expelled by their communities and forced to live in the jungle, where they often stay months or years and finally have to relocate.
- There is still a great need for Christian literature and Bibles in minority languages. For instance: 50% of the total Christian population is from the Khmu tribe and they still do not have a Bible in their own language. Since most Christians are very poor and are often expelled from their villages, socio-economic support is equally needed.

- In its 2018 [annual report](#), the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom again put Laos on its Tier 2 list of countries. (Tier 2 countries are selected for close monitoring due to the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by the government concerned.)

External Links - WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

- How did Christians get there?: mission station
<http://directory.ucanews.com/country/laos/18>
- How did Christians get there?: Presbyterian Christians
<https://laoevangelicalchurch.com/lec-history/>
- Notes on the current situation: annual report
http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF_Tier2_Laos.pdf

WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

Laos scored 71 points in WWL 2019 and ranked 19.

What type of persecution dominates?

Communist and post-Communist oppression: Christianity is seen as a Western ideology that challenges Communism. State authorities oppose any influence deemed Western and seek to control the small Christian minority.

Dictatorial paranoia: Christians must take extreme caution to avoid negative reactions from government officials. Local authorities often make use of society's hostile attitude towards Christians to justify monitoring them.

Ethnic antagonism: Animism and other practices are observed in tribal villages. Abandoning tribal customs for Christian faith is seen as betrayal and will lead to expulsion by village leaders and family members.

Who is driving persecution?

Christians are regularly persecuted by the Communist government authorities - most often at the provincial level - and by local members of the Communist Party. There are occasions where the authorities cooperate with local religious leaders (mostly tribal village leaders, sometimes Buddhist monks as well) in order to put pressure on Christians, especially converts. Converts to Christianity experience persecution in their own family on a very frequent basis. There have also been efforts to monitor the activities of house-churches with the help of certain registered churches. Normal citizens, especially in rural areas, watch Christians with suspicion and sometimes even drive them out of their villages.

What it results in

The Communist authorities heavily monitor all religious activities and control them, including those of the registered church. As all gatherings have to be notified to the administration, house-churches have to operate clandestinely as they are considered "illegal gatherings". Even 75% of all LEC congregations throughout the country do not have permanent church structures and conduct worship services in homes. Converts to Christianity bear the brunt of persecution. They are considered as putting themselves outside the (Buddhist-animist) community and are consequently persecuted by their own (extended, as a Laotian household usually is composed of three generations being under one roof) family and by local authorities, often stirring up the community or using local religious leaders.

Violence

The following table is based on reported cases. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures.

| Laos | Reporting period | Christians killed | Christians attacked | Christians arrested | Churches attacked | Christian-owned houses and shops attacked |
|----------|---------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| WWL 2019 | 01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018 | 0 | 157 | 30 | 3 | 178 |
| WWL 2018 | 01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017 | 1 | 60 | 25 | 0 | 14 |

Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). Christians attacked refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related reasons. Christians arrested refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. Churches attacked refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. Christian-owned houses and shops attacked refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.

Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period

In the WWL 2019 reporting period, three churches were ordered to close. For security reasons, no details can be given. At least 27 Christians were detained and more than sixty physically assaulted when they were expelled from their homes in March 2018. Reports that there have been churches of the Hmong minority destroyed could not be confirmed and were therefore not considered in the scoring.

The [law on associations](#) entered into force on 1 November 2017 and has been making church life complicated. As a direct result, Christians in Luang Prabang Province have received more pressure from police to stop holding meetings. The new law requires a registered place of worship that is owned by the church and a registered minister in order to be considered legal. However, this is almost impossible to accomplish. First, nobody is keen to sell land to a church. Secondly, the new law states that the construction of churches needs to be approved by the prime minister.

In August 2016, Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith issued a new regulation: Decree 315 on the Management and Protection of Religious Activities. Decree 315 defines the Government's role as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities. The government issued an update in August 2017 which brought more restrictions for Christians in the WWL 2019 reporting period.

External Links - WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

- Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: law on associations
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/17/joint-letter-lao-government-re-decree-associations>

WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

Laos scored 71 points in WWL 2019 and ranked 19. The increase of four points, compared to WWL 2018, continues a trend in recent years and reflects the continued high pressure exerted on Christians by the state authorities and a very strong pressure on converts from family, friends, neighbors and the local authorities. The score for violence increased by one point; persecution has never been very violent in Laos. Another increase can be noted in the *National sphere of life*, which is due to reports that the government is actively encouraging churches not to report persecution and to the implementation of the new law on associations, which is felt among churches as well. By increasing the pressure on Christians, Laos follows the example set by other countries still ruled by Communist parties - especially its big neighbor, China.

Persecution engines

| Persecution engines: Laos | Abbreviation | Level of influence |
|-------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Islamic oppression | IO | Not at all |
| Religious nationalism | RN | Medium |
| Ethnic antagonism | EA | Very strong |
| Denominational protectionism | DPR | 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 (long version).

Communist and post-Communist oppression (Very strong):

Laos is one of the five remaining Marxist-Leninist countries in the world, 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. It has a negative view of Christians and considers them to be foreign agents and enemies. Christianity is seen as a Western ideology that challenges Communism. The Lao government controls all information, including newspapers and radio, effectively maintaining a tight control in the country.

Ethnic antagonism (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. Village leaders and family members see it necessary to expel Christians from their communities because of their fear that this foreign faith will anger the guardian spirits. Local officials are also known to force Christians to renounce their faith and village leaders sometimes summon the local authorities to arrest Christians.

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong):

The government is secretive and no one outside the inner circle of leaders seems to know exactly what is going on. Not a single ruler, but the party will do all what is necessary to staying in power. Christians must take extreme caution when talking about their faith. They always have to stay within tacitly understood guidelines and there are limits not to be crossed if Christians want to avoid negative reactions from officials. Local authorities often make use of society's hostile attitude towards Christians to justify monitoring them.

Religious nationalism (Medium):

Laos is one of the five countries following Theravada Buddhism (the oldest Buddhist tradition) and the Buddhist faith is deeply rooted in society. There is a widely shared conviction that Laos and Buddhism are inextricably linked together and that Buddhism should always take the supreme position in the country. The goal of local Buddhist leaders (to keep their country "pure") and the goal of the Communist political leaders (to keep control) complement each other well. Both want to dominate society and prevent deviations from the norm.

Denominational protectionism (Weak):

The Laos Evangelical Church is the dominant church group in the country and until recently, has blocked the entry of other denominations. As other denominations poured in, especially non-traditional Protestant churches, the government uses the LEC to gather information and sometimes to keep those denominations in check.

Drivers of persecution

| Drivers of Persecution: Laos | IO | RN | EA | DPR | CPCO | SI | DPA | OCC |
|------------------------------------------------------------|----|--------|-------------|--------|-------------|----|-------------|-----|
| | - | MEDIUM | VERY STRONG | WEAK | VERY STRONG | - | STRONG | - |
| Government officials | - | Strong | Medium | - | Very strong | - | Very strong | - |
| Ethnic group leaders | - | Strong | Strong | - | Medium | - | Medium | - |
| Non-Christian religious leaders | - | Strong | Strong | - | Medium | - | Medium | - |
| Religious leaders of other churches | - | - | - | Medium | Medium | - | Medium | - |
| Violent religious groups | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Ideological pressure groups | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs | - | Medium | Strong | - | Weak | - | Weak | - |
| One's own (extended) family | - | Strong | Very strong | - | Weak | - | - | - |
| Political parties | - | - | Weak | - | Very strong | - | Very strong | - |
| Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Organized crime cartels or networks | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |

| | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

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 (long version).

Drivers of Communist and post-Communist oppression: Christians are regularly persecuted by the Communist government authorities - most often at the provincial level - and by local members of the Communist Party. There are occasions where the authorities cooperate with local religious leaders (mostly Buddhist monks) in order to put pressure on Christians, especially converts.

Drivers of Ethnic antagonism: Converts to Christianity experience persecution in their own family on a very frequent basis, often stirred up by local ethnic group leaders, at times in collusion with the village leaders as well. As the decision not to venerate the spirits anymore affects the whole community, normal citizens, especially in rural areas, are watching Christians with suspicion and sometimes even drive them out of their villages.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia: The Communist government authorities and the Communist Party will do everything they see as necessary to stay in power. As ethnic group and religious leaders see the benefit of them staying in power, they are given support.

Drivers of Religious nationalism: Where Buddhism is strong, non-Christian religious leaders (in cooperation with the community and families) will make sure that Christians are not able to establish themselves in villages and that converts are put under pressure to return to Buddhism.

Drivers of Denominational protectionism: Authorities have made efforts to monitor the activities of house-churches with the help of certain registered churches, reportedly with some success.

Context

Laos has been in the tight grip of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party since 1975. Its exclusive networks of party members’ families and close friends add to the pressure felt strongly by every citizen, but especially by minorities. The country lacks freedom of opinion, let alone a free press which could highlight the manifold cases of [corruption](#). Any organized group, particularly if not in line with the ideology imposed by the government, is perceived as a threat to the preservation of Communism in the country.

The country’s dependency on its giant neighbor China, especially as a land-locked country, hampers development, makes Laos vulnerable and [causes substantial debt](#). China is by far the largest foreign investor in the country. However, growing environmental and social costs led the authorities to intervene in the WWL 2019 reporting period, for example in an [armed attack](#) against two Chinese-owned cement factories in June 2018. Laotian girls continue to be [trafficked](#) to China due to a lack of female spouses there.

Christian communities and how they are affected

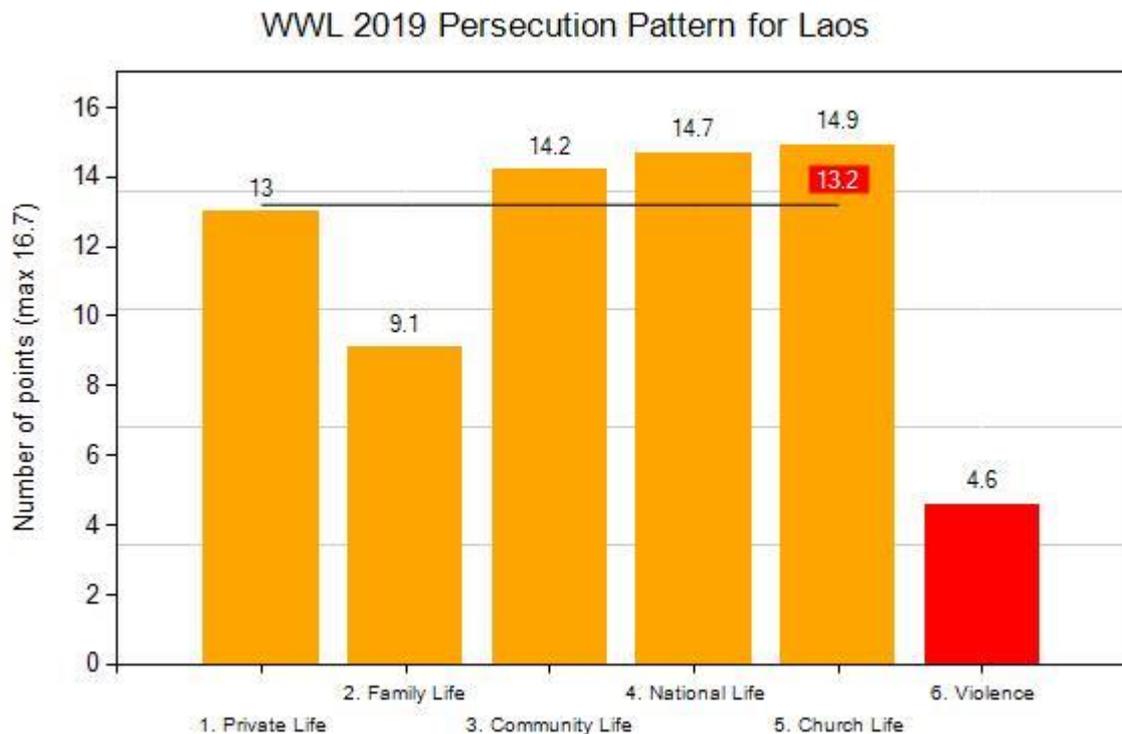
Communities of expatriate Christians: Such communities do not mix with local churches, except in rare cases in an urban setting. They include communities of diplomatic staff and are facing pressure, for example, through the police monitoring system.

Historical Christian communities: These are communities such as the Roman Catholic Church, Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) and the Seventh Day Adventists: Whereas these churches are officially recognized by the authorities, they are monitored and - in case of the LEC - face restrictions in choosing their own leaders and printing Christian materials. The government partly forces them to monitor non-registered churches.

Converts to Christianity: Converts come from a Buddhist or Ethnic-animist background and are facing the strongest persecution both from local authorities and from families, friends and neighbors. Since every conversion is an indication that Christianity is growing, the government is wary of conversions as well.

Non-traditional Christian communities: Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations, Methodists, 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. Congregations that do not, have to meet clandestinely. Members of those churches also face discrimination at various levels of society.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The WWL 2019 Persecution pattern for Laos shows:

- The average pressure on Christians over all *Spheres of life* is at a very high level, increasing from a score of 12.8 in WWL 2018 to 13.2 in WWL 2019.
- Pressure is strongest (and at an extreme level) in the *Church, National and Community spheres*. Pressure on converts is especially acute in the *Private and Community spheres*, while all Christians face growing pressure in the *National and Church spheres*. This pressure is a result of the authorities re-emphasizing Communist values and trying to keep the number of conversions down. It also reflects the government's effort to stay in power and fight all forces perceived as alien.

- The increase in pressure corresponds with a slight growth in the level of violence against Christians: The violence score increased from 3.5 in WWL 2018 to 4.1 in WWL 2019. More reports from Laos were obtained, which helped in better assessing the situation of Christians in the country and which thus account for some of the rise in points.

Private sphere:

Converts always have to be very careful how they worship, especially if they are the only believers in their family. In remote places, houses only have one room (and in many places three generations are living under one roof) which makes it very difficult to find a place to read the Bible, pray or worship undisturbed and unnoticed. Converts experience physical and verbal abuse and can be expelled from their homes. As all gatherings are seen as dangerous by the authorities, every meeting needs to be approved by local officials, who effectively hinder meetings or declare them illegal. Most villages are led by a village chief (*pho ban* or *nai ban*) and one or two assistants who are elected by the villagers to oversee all activities in their village and maintain peace in the sense of preserving the culture. District and province officials sometimes use their positions and threaten Christians with expulsion from their villages for Christian activities including worship, prayer and Bible reading. Many Lao believe they are protected by *phi* (spirits). The fear of offending the spirits often turns family members against Christians. If so, they hinder Christian relatives from meeting with other Christians or even leaving the house. Bibles and other Christian materials have to be hidden carefully and can only be read with much caution. All Christians are closely monitored, and at times, the help of registered churches is used for keeping an eye on the Christians.

Family sphere:

Family records (or "family cards") are sometimes confiscated from Christians which make the registration of all family events (births, weddings, deaths) impossible. In strongly Buddhist areas, weddings and burials, which are always connected with appeasing the spirits, have been hindered, and baptisms have had to be carried out with the utmost caution. Buddhist teachings are often considered part of Lao "cultural education" and are therefore part of the curriculum in school. In one reported case, Christian students were required to attend an actual Buddhist temple ritual which was against their Christian faith. Children of Christian families have even been denied admittance at some schools because of their faith and were discouraged in their studies as they would not have any future in finding a job as Christians afterwards. Two common things families use to put pressure on converts is the threat of divorce (if married) and the loss of inheritance rights.

Community sphere:

Provinces like Luang Namtha, Phongsaly and Houphan in the north and Savannakhet in the south have traditionally been difficult places for Christians since the local authorities in these provinces still seem very determined to wipe out any Christian witness. They continue to harass, arrest and evict Christians from their homes. Christianity is seen as Western, a dangerous divergence from Communist ideology and hence a threat to the nation. Local communities frequently assist in the monitoring of Christian activities. Family members, villagers, and local authorities regularly threaten or even beat Christians in an attempt to make them renounce their faith. The community expects Christians to take part in Buddhist and animistic ceremonies. The *baci* ceremony is a communal event to invoke the spirits and expresses goodwill, good luck, and good health to those being honored. The ceremony is meant to invoke spirits to return home and re-establish equilibrium. A white thread tied around the wrist is supposed to ensure protection from spirits. Christians prefer to stay away from such ceremonies that involve the spirit world. Their refusal to participate in the rituals often causes friction in the village.

Community leaders and neighbors expect everyone to participate in Buddhists ceremonies. They fear curses from the spirits if not everyone participates. If they can't force the Christian to participate they would ask the monk or a village spiritual head to curse the Christians.

Christians are seen as divergent to the norm. Families that were expelled from villages said they had neighbors that wanted to convert but were hesitant since they saw Christianity to be disadvantageous to their lives in the community. Communist leaders also fear the spread of Christianity and refer to it as a Western ideology which weakens the nation. This negative view towards Christians leads to delays in assistance, threats and restrictions from both the community and local authorities. Christians often face limitations in the use of community resources. In one case, a pregnant Christian woman was denied access to a hospital to give birth. In the WWL 2019 reporting period, there have been cases of Christians being denied employment for faith-related reasons and Christian business-owners have been discriminated against. Local authorities also fine Christians for illegal meetings. In some cases, even materials owned by Christians (e.g. cars and technical equipment) have been confiscated.

National sphere:

Article 9 of the Constitution (amended in 2003) states that it is the duty of the State to respect and protect all religions, particularly mentioning Buddhists and monks, while Article 43 says that Lao citizens have the right and freedom to believe or not to believe in any religion. However, since the promulgation of Decree 92 in 2002, those broad provisions on religious practices have been abused to make the true exercise of religious freedom more difficult. This Decree demands the government's prior consent for any religious activity: Without this consent any activity is considered illegal. Conversion to a new faith, preaching, and conducting church activities all require government permission. Based on the experience of Christian leaders, the government hardly ever gives permission. Decree 92 was then replaced by Decree 315 in August 2016, which defines the Government's role as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities. The government then issued an update in August 2017 called the "Law on Associations", which came into force on 15 November 2017 and brought even more restrictions and trouble for Christians. The new law - which also applies to charity organizations - requires a registered place of worship that is owned by the church and a registered minister in order to be considered legal. However, this is almost impossible to accomplish.

Visiting another province requires approval from the provincial head of one's own province and the province of the target visit. The village head in this province has to agree as well. Getting such permission for church work is almost impossible and consequently many Christians make visits without permits at the risk of being fined, imprisoned or expelled. International monitoring of court cases have been hindered. According to the United States Department on International Religious Freedom 2017: "Religious groups said provincial government officials asked religious leaders not to report grievances to foreigners in exchange for greater religious freedom. According to religious groups, the central government continued efforts to keep individuals who had been arrested, banished, punished, marginalized, or had otherwise been the victim of abuses due to their religious beliefs out of sight of international observers." This active effort in hindering international monitoring contributed to an increase in the scores for *National life*, as did the new [law on associations](#) which entered into force in November 2017, making church life even more complicated.

Christianity is seen as an insult to the Buddhist faith which is embraced as being a central part of Lao culture and therefore of the nation's identity. But Christians are also accused by village leaders of angering spirits whenever there is widespread sickness in their village. They are frequently accused of unethical conversion and in the WWL 2019 reporting period, some were even detained for that reason. If perpetrators attack Christians or churches, they nearly always go unpunished. Christians cannot

expect to receive fair treatment and justice from the police, authorities or courts. The media continues to present Christianity as a remnant of the colonial days and a source of anger for the spirits.

Church sphere:

The pressure on church life is extremely high. All activities in churches are closely monitored. The government also intimidates and threatens church leaders suspected of proselytizing. The government is slightly more tolerant of religious practices in urban areas but has often acted severely in rural areas. Local officials and police often interfered with the right to worship in a number of places and are aware of all groups that meet for worship. They raided churches and confiscated Bibles and other Christian literature. Believers were also threatened with jail sentences if they did not recant their faith. The LEC churches at times try to monitor the activities of house-churches for the authorities. The government will act on any statements which are against Communist ideology. Churches need to submit detailed reports in order to get permission from local authorities to meet and worship. Communities often hinder churches from setting up and building places of worship. At times, the community uses force to stop church construction. Tremendous administrative requirements must be fulfilled before a church can be built. This is especially true for the northern provinces. In some rural areas, a local officer is even required to attend worship in order to monitor the Christians. All Christian materials published (or imported legally) need to be approved by both the government and the LEC church. Even 75% of the LEC congregations throughout the country do not have permanent church structures and conduct worship services in homes, according to the Country Report 2017 of the US State Department. Local officials accompanied by the police have been known to confiscate Bibles and other Christian material from house-churches. Since the passing of the NGO Law in 2014, the government has increasingly controlled the charitable activities of Christian ministries in the country. The [Law on Associations](#), in force since November 2017, gives the government more leverage for limiting churches and especially its involvement and outreach in the community.

Violence:

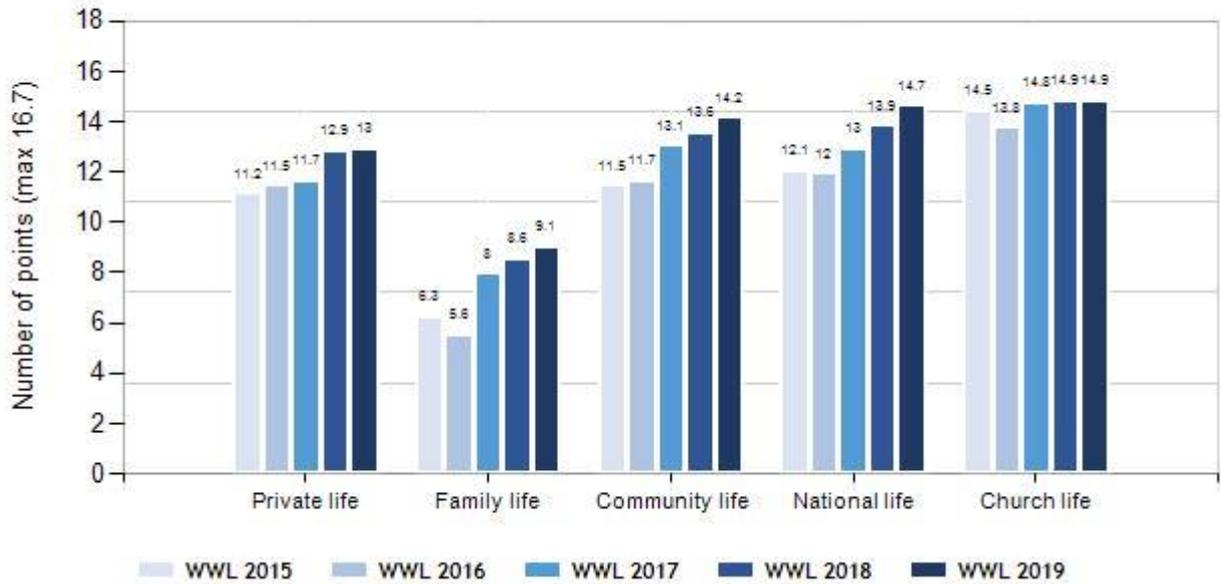
There have been several cases where Christians were expelled from their communities or detained for "proselytizing" in the WWL 2019 reporting period. One pastor was imprisoned for showing a film about Jesus at Christmas 2017. There were also reports of more Hmong Christians being detained and arrested. Three churches were ordered by the authorities to stop worship.

For a summary of the statistics on violence and examples, please see the Short and Simple Persecution Profile section above.

5 Year trends

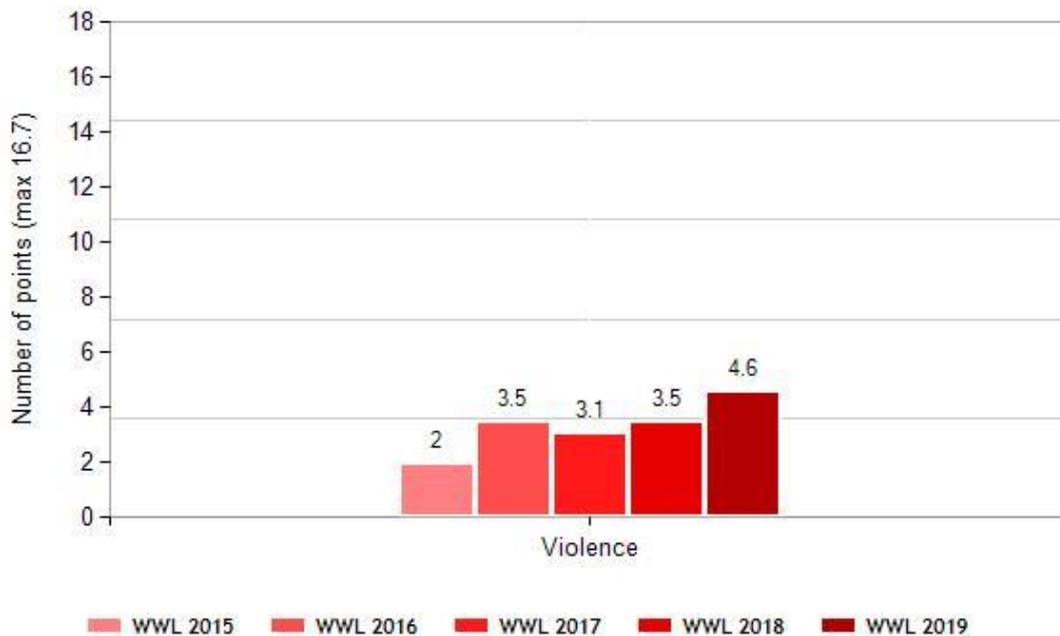
There has been an upward trend in pressure and violence against Christians in Laos over the last five WWL reporting periods, as can be seen in the three charts below. Despite the rises in pressure, Chart 1 shows that the pressure in the *Church* and *Private spheres of life* has levelled off at an extreme and a very high level respectively. The continued increase in *National life* reflects the increasing boldness of the government to rely on Communist ideology. The growing levels of pressure in *Private, Family* and *Community life* show that families of converts continue to prioritize ancestor and spirit worship and also reflect an improved flow of reports coming from Laos on the persecution of Christians. Consequently, the average level of pressure increased every year from 11.1 in WWL 2015 to 13.2 in WWL 2019. Violence against Christians has never been very pronounced in Laos, but has increased over the five years to a new high level, especially due to churches being closed and Christians expelled from village communities.

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Laos (Spheres of life)



| WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: Laos | Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life |
|----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| 2019 | 13.2 |
| 2018 | 12.8 |
| 2017 | 12.1 |
| 2016 | 10.9 |
| 2015 | 11.1 |

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Laos (Violence)



Gender specific persecution

Women and men are in general treated equally in Laos and persecution affects them in the same way when it comes to social ostracism or when they are forced to leave their villages because of their faith. However, as women traditionally care for a family's children, in such cases they have a greater burden to bear. Additionally, and as already mentioned above, women and girls are in danger of being trafficked due to poverty. Hand in hand with this goes the danger of being raped and sexually harassed. But this does not seem to affect Christians specifically. As in most cases men are the main breadwinners; if they lose their job or are driven out of the village this naturally affects the whole family. When men or boys are imprisoned, the family usually have to pay a considerable sum of money for them to be released. In the case of church leaders, this severely affects not only the family but churches as well.

Persecution of other religious minorities

Decree 315, implemented by the Laotian government (see "National sphere"), will have consequences for other religious groups like Buddhists or animists, and not just Christians. Buddhists sometimes face problems when registering monks, especially when they are outside mainstream Buddhist teaching. Among the ethnic communities, it is the Hmong (who are both animists and Christians) who have faced the greatest oppression from the government. Muslims, Hindus and adherents of Bahai form tiny minorities in the country. There were no reports on the persecution of these religions available.

Future outlook

The political outlook: Laos left the international limelight when it ended its chairmanship of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) at the end of 2016. This does not mean, however, that the challenges the country faces will get any smaller. The main challenge for the country remains its relationship with its giant neighbor, China.

The outlook for Christians - viewed through the lens of:

- **Communist and post-Communist oppression, blended with Dictatorial paranoia:** No initiatives will be tolerated which cannot be controlled by the Communist authorities and this will remain true for the Christian minority well into the future and reflects the unbroken power of the country's Communist Party. The authorities continue to come down very harshly on any perceived dissent and deviation (which includes Christian faith).
- **Religious nationalism:** Laos is one of the few Buddhist countries worldwide. Leaving the faith means leaving community and fellowship, putting oneself outside of society. This will not change in the coming years.
- **Ethnic antagonism:** The fear of spirits permeates and dominates the life of most Laotians, especially in the rural areas. Whoever does not join in their veneration, not only excludes himself/herself from the community, but is also seen as bringing doom and the revenge of spirits upon the whole community. This belief - and hence the persecution of converts - will not change in the foreseeable future.

Conclusion: International media reacted positively when the United Nations ECOSOC [announced](#) that it will upgrade Laos' economic status in 2024 (removing it from the category "Least Developing Countries") if Laos can continue its growth levels at the current rate. However, the country may find itself in a catch-22 situation in the foreseeable future: Foreign investment is available

without opening up the economy to market forces in collaboration with China; but the price is a growing dependence on China. Thus, an ECOSOC upgrade does not mean anything for the question of human rights, for minorities and for freedom of religion. Additionally, that this growth comes at a price could already be seen in July 2018: In striving to become a power source for all South East Asia, Laos has allowed international companies to build several dams in order to capitalize on the country's potential in water energy. In July 2018, a dam which was still under construction [broke](#), killing dozens of people. Questions will be increasingly asked about who exactly is benefitting from projects like this. If the ties to China get closer, Christians will continue to be side-lined and discriminated against and it is even possible that China's strict policy against religions may serve as a role model for the government in Laos.

External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

- Context: corruption
<http://www.aseantoday.com/2018/06/thongloun-sisouliths-losing-battle-against-corruption/>
- Context: causes substantial debt
<https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/chinas-debtbook-diplomacy-how-china-is-turning-bad-loans-into-strategic-investments/>
- Context: armed attack
<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/factories-06292018110551.html>
- Context: trafficked
<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/chinese-marriage-proposals-02132017122352.html>
- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence: law on associations
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/17/joint-letter-lao-government-re-decree-associations>
- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence: Law on Associations
https://international.la-croix.com/news/push-against-lao-decree/8642?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=e-mail&utm_content=16-10-2018&utm_campaign=newsletter_crx_lci&PMID=58d1f792a26689dfa2699c74ec4d75ae
- Future outlook: announced
<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/lao-04182018152511.html>
- Future outlook: broke
<http://www.newmandala.org/lao-dam-collapse-tragedy-long-making/>

Additional Reports and Articles

WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

Open Doors article(s) from the region

A selection of articles is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

World Watch Monitor news articles

Use the country search function at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

Recent country developments

Use the country search function at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/> (password: freedom).