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## Laos: Country Dossier

December 2019



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2020

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017	Total Score WWL 2016
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	92	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	94	93	89	88
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.5	9.4	92	91	91	91	87
4	Libya	15.3	15.5	15.8	16.0	16.4	11.3	90	87	86	78	79
5	Pakistan	14.0	13.9	15.0	14.9	13.7	16.7	88	87	86	88	87
6	Eritrea	14.5	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	10.9	87	86	86	82	89
7	Sudan	14.2	14.6	14.5	15.7	16.1	10.4	85	87	87	87	84
8	Yemen	16.6	16.4	16.4	16.7	16.7	2.6	85	86	85	85	78
9	Iran	14.1	14.3	14.1	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	85	85	85	83
10	India	12.9	13.0	13.5	15.0	13.5	14.8	83	83	81	73	68
11	Syria	13.5	14.2	13.0	13.9	14.4	12.6	82	82	76	86	87
12	Nigeria	12.2	11.9	13.5	12.8	13.0	16.7	80	80	77	78	78
13	Saudi Arabia	15.1	14.9	14.1	15.5	16.5	2.4	79	77	79	76	76
14	Maldives	15.4	15.6	14.0	15.9	16.6	0.7	78	78	78	76	76
15	Iraq	14.0	14.6	13.9	14.5	13.6	5.6	76	79	86	86	90
16	Egypt	12.1	13.1	10.7	13.2	10.5	16.1	76	76	70	65	64
17	Algeria	13.5	14.3	10.4	12.8	13.2	9.3	73	70	58	58	56
18	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	3.0	73	74	73	71	70
19	Myanmar	11.8	11.9	13.5	12.5	12.2	10.7	73	71	65	62	62
20	Laos	12.8	9.9	14.1	14.4	14.9	5.6	72	71	67	64	58
21	Vietnam	12.3	8.5	12.9	13.6	14.5	9.8	72	70	69	71	66
22	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.2	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.9	70	69	68	67	66
23	China	11.6	8.4	11.6	12.8	15.1	10.2	70	65	57	57	57
24	Mauritania	13.9	14.0	13.0	13.7	13.4	0.2	68	67	57	55	50
25	Central African Republic	10.1	9.1	13.1	9.8	10.2	15.6	68	70	61	58	59
26	Morocco	12.4	13.3	10.8	11.7	14.1	4.1	66	63	51	49	47
27	Qatar	13.6	13.4	10.8	12.2	14.1	2.2	66	62	63	66	65
28	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	10.2	9.4	11.8	15.6	66	48	-	-	-
29	Mali	9.2	8.2	12.8	10.0	11.7	13.7	66	68	59	59	55
30	Sri Lanka	11.5	9.0	11.0	10.9	9.6	13.1	65	58	57	55	53
31	Tajikistan	13.9	12.3	11.9	12.4	13.1	1.1	65	65	65	58	58
32	Nepal	12.4	10.8	9.9	12.1	12.2	7.0	64	64	64	53	53
33	Jordan	13.1	14.1	10.7	11.7	12.5	1.7	64	65	66	63	59
34	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.3	10.8	12.3	5.4	64	63	62	61	58
35	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	10.7	12.4	14.0	1.7	64	63	63	56	55

36	Turkey	12.6	11.8	10.7	13.3	11.3	3.7	63	66	62	57	55
37	Brunei	13.8	14.3	10.7	10.3	13.5	0.6	63	63	64	64	61
38	Bangladesh	11.1	9.9	12.7	11.1	8.9	9.3	63	58	58	63	57
39	Ethiopia	10.0	9.2	10.6	10.8	10.4	11.9	63	65	62	64	67
40	Malaysia	12.1	14.6	12.7	12.0	9.6	1.5	62	60	65	60	58
41	Colombia	8.9	7.8	11.9	9.8	8.9	15.0	62	58	56	53	55
42	Oman	12.7	13.1	10.0	11.5	12.7	2.0	62	59	57	53	53
43	Kuwait	13.2	13.1	9.9	11.5	13.4	0.7	62	60	61	57	56
44	Kenya	11.7	10.5	10.9	8.3	10.9	9.1	61	61	62	68	68
45	Bhutan	12.8	10.9	11.8	11.6	13.9	0.0	61	64	62	61	56
46	Russian Federation	12.2	8.3	10.7	10.4	12.1	6.9	60	60	51	46	48
47	United Arab Emirates	12.9	13.0	9.5	11.1	12.6	1.1	60	58	58	55	55
48	Cameroon	8.8	7.2	11.6	7.0	10.4	15.0	60	54	38	-	45
49	Indonesia	10.9	11.1	11.6	10.2	9.5	6.5	60	65	59	55	55
50	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.1	9.3	60	52	45	47	53
51	Palestinian Territories	12.2	13.0	9.2	10.2	11.9	3.1	60	57	60	64	62
52	Mexico	8.4	6.8	12.2	10.6	10.0	11.5	60	61	59	57	56
53	Azerbaijan	13.0	10.0	9.3	11.1	12.4	1.5	57	57	57	52	57
54	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.9	13.9	0.9	57	56	56	56	56
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.1	9.4	11.9	1.1	57	56	54	48	46
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.2	56	56	56	57	58
57	Democratic Republic of the Congo	5.6	6.7	10.6	7.4	10.4	15.6	56	55	33	-	53
58	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	5.9	56	48	40	-	51
59	Bahrain	12.1	12.3	9.1	10.1	10.5	0.9	55	55	57	54	54
60	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	7.0	55	52	53	59	57
61	Cuba	9.6	5.6	9.5	11.8	12.0	3.5	52	49	49	47	42
62	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	13.0	48	47	46	53	45
63	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.7	48	43	-	-	-
64	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	3.7	45	46	-	-	-
65	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.6	44	44	-	-	-
66	Mozambique	6.9	4.6	7.1	5.2	8.0	11.7	43	43	-	-	-
67	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	1.1	43	43	-	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	8.7	10.4	6.7	43	42	-	-	-
69	Venezuela	3.8	4.4	10.6	9.3	9.5	4.8	42	41	34	-	-
70	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.5	42	43	-	-	-
71	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	7.2	42	41	-	-	-
72	Nicaragua	5.8	4.2	8.5	9.8	9.0	4.1	41	41	-	-	-
73	Togo	8.6	6.7	8.5	7.1	8.4	1.1	41	42	-	-	-

## Copyright notice

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## Brief note on sources and definitions

This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD). 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”. The WWL 2020 reporting period was 1 November 2018 - 31 October 2019.

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 including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

# WWL 2020: Persecution summary / Laos

## Brief country details

Pop 2019	Christians	Chr%
Laos		
7,064,000	227,000	3.2

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

World Watch List Laos	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2020	72	20
WWL 2019	71	19
WWL 2018	67	20
WWL 2017	64	24
WWL 2016	58	29

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2016-2020 reporting periods.

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

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

## Brief description of persecution situation

The Communist authorities heavily monitor all religious activities, 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 government-approved Lao Evangelical Church (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 guilty of putting themselves outside the (Buddhist-animist) community and are consequently persecuted by their family (which, in a Laotian household, usually consists of three generations under one roof) and by the local authorities. Both will often stir up the local community or seek assistance from local religious leaders.

## Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period

- In the WWL 2020 reporting period, at least five house-churches had to stop their meetings due to orders by the authorities and threats from the community; three were at least partly destroyed. At least 12 Christians were detained around Christmas 2018 and more than sixty physically assaulted when they were expelled from their homes in March 2018. Three US Christians were [detained](#) for distributing Christian materials in Luang Namtha province in April 2019 and deported after a week.
- The [law on associations](#), No. 238, entered into force on 1 November 2017 and has been making church life complicated. As a direct result, Christians have been under increased pressure from the police to stop holding meetings. The new law requires churches to have both 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. Finally, land can easily be confiscated by the government.
- 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 has continued to make life difficult for Christians in the WWL 2020 reporting period.

## External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution summary

- Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period: detained - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/christians-detained-04162019180934.html>
- Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period: law on associations - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/17/joint-letter-lao-government-re-decree-associations>



# WWL 2020: Keys to understanding / Laos

## Link for general background information

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

## Recent 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 a short-lived 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 has become 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.

## Political and legal landscape

The Communist Party does not plan any changes or even democratic reforms. Being influenced by two bigger neighbors which for several years now have been increasingly emphasizing Communist values (China and Vietnam), Laos is looking to them for examples of 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 and supervision is neither strong nor fast. The Communist Party continues to stick to its traditional patterns of ruling - 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 belong 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 in combination with local religious leaders.

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.

## Religious landscape

The country is still in the tight grip of the Communist Party and therefore religion is something the 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 being foreign, linked with Western values and an enemy of Communism.

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. It is expected from men to follow this tradition and it leads to a natural bond with Buddhism, monasteries and the monkhood.

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.

Religious Context: Laos	Numbers	%
Christians	227,000	3.2
Muslim	8,100	0.1
Hindu	5,500	0.1
Buddhist	3,720,000	52.7
Ethnoreligionist	2,963,000	41.9
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	17,000	0.2
Atheist	20,600	0.3

Agnostic	64,800	0.9
Other	38,120	0.5

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019). OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

According to WCD 2019 estimates, 52.7% of the population are Buddhist, mainly following the Theravada teachings. 41.9% adhere to ethnic religions (Chinese folk not included) 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.

## Economic landscape

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](#), (removing it from the category "Least Developing Countries") if Laos can continue its growth levels at the current rate. There remains an enormous gap between development in urban and in rural areas, the latter being the least developed (especially in terms of infrastructure such as 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. A far-reaching anti-corruption campaign had some positive results, but did not eradicate the deeply rooted networks.

Despite all development in infrastructure and elsewhere, the majority of Laotians still work in the agricultural sector, the CIA World Factbook estimated that in 2012 more than 73% of all workers were employed in this sector. Although this rate may be decreasing, it still shows that it is no exaggeration to call Laos a rural society.

Additionally, 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, especially in [external debt](#), a claim heavily disputed by the government. Thus, an ECOSOC upgrade does not mean anything for the question of human rights, for minorities and for freedom of religion. Additionally, the fact that this growth comes at a price could already be seen in July 2018: In striving to become a power source (or "battery") 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. Locals are [protesting](#) against China-induced development projects, but so far, it is hard for the government to say no to Chinese offers. Laos tries to diversify its foreign investment and has had some success; for example, South Korea is another large [foreign investor](#). But as so often being the case, these developments go hand in hand with the fact that the majority of the population is left behind and does not see anything of the promised growth and wealth.

## Social and cultural landscape

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.

Laos is still quite a poor and [under-developed](#) country. Although the minimum wage was [raised in 2018](#), it is still well below that of its neighbors. Unsurprisingly, seeing how Laos deals with poverty issues, the "working poor" rate stands at a staggering 77.2%, according to UNDP. 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. When the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights claimed at the end of June 2019 (after a country visit) that the economic model of Laos does [nothing to decrease](#) poverty and inequality, the government contradicted this publicly and sharply. It remains a challenge, however, to translate infrastructure projects like dams or the highspeed trainline built by China into benefits for the lives of ordinary people.

## Technological landscape

The UNDP is not providing data about the country's HDI and even if data is available, it is frequently outdated or based on estimations. Neither does Freedom House rank Laos in its "Freedom on the Net" report. Therefore all data supplied needs to be treated with caution.

According to the CIA World Factbook, based on 2016, the Internet penetration rate in Laos stood at 18.2% and the cellular subscriptions per 100 inhabitants at 52. According to [internetworldstats.com](#), the penetration rate in 2018 was 35.4%. The ITU states that [in 2017](#), the mobile-cellular subscriptions stood at 54.1 (roughly half compared to the world average), households with Internet access were at 25.5%, the bandwidth being roughly a fourth of the world average.

All these figures have to be seen against the background of a wide urban-rural gap. Although the capital of Laos, Vientiane, is still relatively small compared to other Asian cities, people from the rural areas are flocking to the cities in search of employment and a better life. Despite this, the urbanization rate still stood at only 35% in 2018 (CIA World Factbook), indicating that most people are living in rural areas with less and lower quality infrastructure.

In July 2019, Laos announced a new law against what it perceives as "fake news", according to which all private online news websites, an important information source for an increasing number of Laotians, will have to be [registered](#).

## Security situation

Laos does not face any particular security challenges. Since it does have a strong Hmong minority of over 9%, it is affected by its big neighbor Vietnam's policy of [cracking down](#) on the Hmong - of whom many are Christian. However, the ethnic violent insurgency and efforts for independence ended when its leader was arrested in 2007 in the USA. The Laotian government is more focused on keeping in check perceived dissidents in the country than external threats.

## Trends analysis

Apart from the social challenges and the good news of enjoying one of the highest economic growth rates in Asia, 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 sunk into oblivion again as far as international attention is concerned and the plight of persecuted Christians in Laos continues largely unnoticed, as does the situation of human rights in general.

## External Links - WWL 2020: Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-15351898>. - <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-15351898>
- Recent history: fastest growing economies - <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lao>
- Economic landscape: announced - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/lao-04182018152511.html>
- Economic landscape: external debt - <https://www.aseantoday.com/2019/06/can-laos-manage-its-debt-to-china/>
- Economic landscape: broke - <http://www.newmandala.org/lao-dam-collapse-tragedy-long-making/>

- Economic landscape: protesting - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/plans-01042019144956.html>
- Economic landscape: foreign investor - <http://www.aseantoday.com/2018/12/as-laos-sees-growing-investment-from-south-korea-local-communities-are-left-behind/>
- Social and cultural landscape: under-developed - <https://www.gfmag.com/global-data/economic-data/worlds-richest-and-poorest-countries>
- Social and cultural landscape: raised in 2018 - <https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/2018/05/31/laos-increases-minimum-monthly-wage-third-time-eight-years.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: nothing to decrease - <https://www.aseantoday.com/2019/07/lao-government-contests-findings-of-un-poverty-report/>
- Technological landscape: internetworldstats.com - <https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm>
- Technological landscape: in 2017 - [https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/LDCs/Documents/2017/Country%20Profiles/Country%20Profile\\_Lao%20PDR.pdf](https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/LDCs/Documents/2017/Country%20Profiles/Country%20Profile_Lao%20PDR.pdf)
- Technological landscape: registered - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/register-07192019160935.html>
- Security situation: cracking down - [https://unpo.org/article/21467?utm\\_source=ADF+International+Alliance+Alert+Subscribers&utm\\_campaign=1897a35011-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2018\\_09\\_30\\_09\\_41\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_d877f2b466-1897a35011-92571169&mc\\_cid=1897a35011&mc\\_eid=c00a030885](https://unpo.org/article/21467?utm_source=ADF+International+Alliance+Alert+Subscribers&utm_campaign=1897a35011-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_09_30_09_41_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_d877f2b466-1897a35011-92571169&mc_cid=1897a35011&mc_eid=c00a030885)

## WWL 2020: Church information / Laos

### Christian origins

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.

### Church spectrum today

Church networks: Laos	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	46,300	20.4
Protestant	179,000	78.9
Independent	1,700	0.7
Unaffiliated	100	0.0
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>227,100</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	182,000	80.2
Renewalist movement	21,500	9.5

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

*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.*

### External Links - WWL 2020: Church information

- Christian origins: mission station - <http://directory.ucanews.com/country/laos/18>
- Christian origins: Presbyterian Christians - <https://laoevangelicalchurch.com/lec-history/>

# WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics / Laos

## Reporting period

1 November 2018 – 31 October 2019

## Position on World Watch List (WWL)

Laos scored 72 points in WWL 2020 and ranked 20.

The increase of one point compared to WWL 2019 was caused by more violence against Christians being reported. The pressure exerted on Christians by the state authorities and a very strong pressure on converts from family, friends, neighbors and the local authorities continued on the same level. By putting high 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
Clan and ethnic antagonism	CEA	Very strong
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Medium
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Very strong
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Weak

*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):

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. 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.

### Clan and 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 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. 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. The Communist Party - rather than a single ruling politician - will do everything necessary to stay 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. Local officials are frequently much stronger in acting against Christians than those at the national level.

**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.

**Christian denominational protectionism (Medium):**

The Laos Evangelical Church (LEC) 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. However, in recent times there has been increasing cooperation between the churches.

**Drivers of persecution**

Drivers of Persecution: Laos	IO	RN	CEA	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	-	MEDIUM	VERY STRONG	MEDIUM	VERY STRONG	-	STRONG	WEAK
Government officials	-	Strong	Medium	-	Very strong	-	Very strong	Weak
Ethnic group leaders	-	Strong	Strong	-	Medium	-	Medium	Weak
Non-Christian religious leaders	-	Strong	Strong	-	Medium	-	Medium	Very weak
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	Medium	Medium	-	Medium	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	Very weak	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	-	Medium	Strong	-	Weak	-	-	-

One's own (extended) family	-	Strong	Very strong	-	Weak	-	-	-
Political parties	-	-	-	-	Very strong	-	Very strong	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Weak
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.

#### Drivers of Communist and post-Communist oppression:

- **Government officials (Very strong):** Christians are regularly persecuted 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.
- **Political parties (Very strong):** Members of the Communist Party, again especially at the local level, see Christians as going against the doctrine that religion is opium for the people and Christianity in particular is connected with the West, hence, they go against Christians.
- **Ethnic group and Non-Christian religious leaders (Medium):** At least on paper, these leaders heed Communist doctrine, so when they put pressure on Christians, the authorities are not likely to stop them.
- **Christian religious leaders (Medium):** The state-recognized Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) is seen by some Christians as having compromised with the Communist Party and is therefore not a viable partner to work with. However, it has at times supported and helped unregistered churches. At other times, it has made its monopoly felt, for example in the training of church leaders.

#### Drivers of Clan and ethnic antagonism:

- **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.
- **Ethnic group leaders and Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** Often, persecution against converts is stirred up by local ethnic group leaders, at times in collusion with village leaders as well. 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.

- **Normal citizens (Strong):** 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 are often complicit in community action against Christians by remaining silent or - at the local level - by supporting them, sometimes even despite higher orders to the contrary.

#### Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

The drivers of Dictatorial paranoia are virtually identical with those discussed above for the persecution engine *Communist and post-Communist oppression*.

#### Drivers of Religious nationalism:

- **Government officials (Strong):** While the country is officially Communist, many people follow Buddhist rituals, often mixed with animistic influences. If citizens cannot let go of a religion, the officials prefer them having an indigenous one and not a "foreign" one like Christianity.
- **Extended family (Strong):** If someone decides to leave Buddhism and follow Christianity, they put themselves outside the family and outside society in general. Families will therefore go to great lengths to bring the converts back into the traditional fold.
- **Ethnic group and Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** As already stated above, Christians are seen as disturbing the peace in a village, so those responsible for keeping this peace will put pressure on the Christians to stop causing offence.
- **Ordinary citizens (Medium):** The community in rural areas sees anyone deviating from tradition as a potential danger, especially when something as important as religion is concerned. They will put pressure on a convert to return to the traditional faith.

#### Drivers of Church denominational protectionism:

- **Christian religious leaders (Medium):** The authorities have made efforts to monitor the activities of house-churches with the help of certain registered churches, reportedly with some success.

## Geographical hotspots of persecution

Provinces like Luang Namtha, Phongsaly and Houphphan in the north (where the Hmong minority is also concentrated) and Savannakhet in the south have traditionally been difficult places for Christians since the local authorities in these areas still seem very determined to wipe out any Christian witness.

## Christian communities and how they are affected

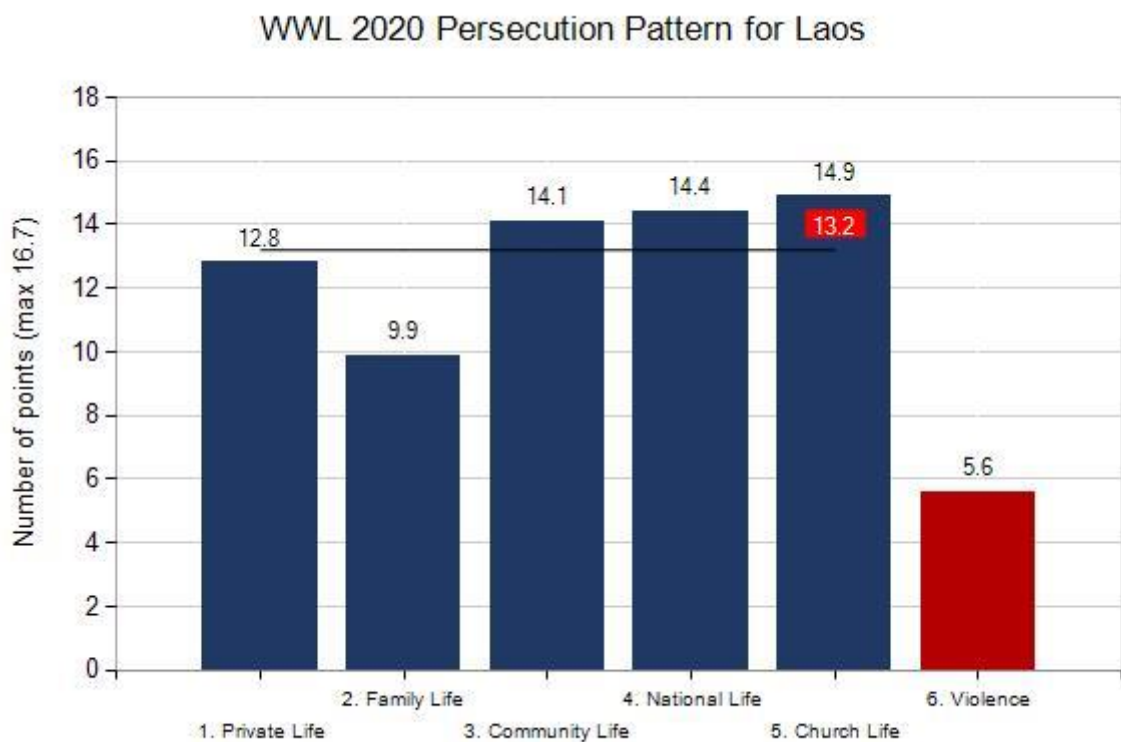
**Communities of expatriate Christians:** Such communities do not mix with local churches, except in rare cases in an urban setting. They include communities of diplomatic staff and are facing pressure, for example, through the police monitoring system.

**Historical Christian communities:** These are communities such as the Roman Catholic Church, Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) and the Seventh Day Adventists: 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 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.

## The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2020 Persecution pattern for Laos shows:

- The average pressure on Christians over all *Spheres of life* is at the very high level of 13.2 points.

- 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 strong 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 violence score increased from 4.1 in WWL 2019 to 5.6 in WWL 2020, as more reports on churches attacked and destroyed were obtained.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, details are shown from four of the highest scoring block questions, with those items scoring highest listed first. 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 0 – 4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

### Private sphere:

- ***It has been risky for Christians to discuss their faith with those other than immediate family members (Block 1.8 / Score: 3.75 points):*** All discussions can be interpreted as attempts at (forced) conversion, which is illegal in Laos. Christians, especially in the villages, are therefore very reluctant to share their faith even with non-Christian family members.
- ***It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians (Block 1.9 / Score: 3.75 points):*** As all Christian gatherings are seen as being potentially 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.
- ***It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols (Block 1.5 / Score: 3.25 points):*** Converts are careful not to attract attention to their Christian faith for fear of discrimination, monitoring or expulsion. Most Christians in villages cannot put up Christian symbols because either they will be accused of causing bad luck or of angering the spirits if they do so and face expulsion.
- ***It has been dangerous to keep privately own or keep Christian materials (Block 1.3 / Score 3.25 points):*** For new converts, keeping Christian materials is especially dangerous as it reveals their newfound faith. It is also illegal to possess Bibles bought outside of Laos or to own a Bibles translated into a tribal language which is not legally approved (or brought from a neighboring country like Vietnam).

*All Christians are closely monitored, and at times, the help of registered churches is used for keeping an eye on the Christians. 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. As soon as writings containing such ideas are discovered by family or the 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. 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.*

**Family sphere:**

- ***Christian children have been pressed to attend anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education (Block 2.8 / Score: 3.75 points):*** Buddhist teachings are often considered part of Lao culture and are therefore part of the standard curriculum in schools. 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 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.
- ***Christian baptisms have been hindered (Block 2.4 / Score: 3.5 points):*** Baptisms have to be carried out with the utmost caution, especially when taking place in rural areas. Even the LEC was not able carry out baptisms freely.
- ***Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith (Block 2.9 / Score: 3.25 points):*** See comments for Block 2.8 above. Also, Christian children are sometimes made to drop out of school by putting pressure on them. And if they keep attending school, their peers often bully them as they are seen as being different.
- ***Burials of Christians have been hindered or coercively performed with non-Christian rites (Block 2.5 / Score: 3 points):*** In tribal village burials, animistic practices are still being observed: in order not to anger the spirits, who would cause illnesses and accidents in the village, the deceased have to be cremated "in the proper way", Christians too. For Christians with a Buddhist background, it is also difficult to avoid Buddhist practices being observed during burial ceremonies.

*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. In some areas, weddings have been hindered or not registered for Christians. 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:**

- **Christians have been hindered in participating in communal institutions, forums, etc., for faith-related reasons (Block 3.6 / Score: 4 points):** At least every three months there are community gatherings. Christians are not just systematically excluded from them, the local authorities will also use these meetings frequently to warn against the danger Christians pose and discourage the community from supporting them. Even in cities like Vientiane, Christians are usually excluded from such community gatherings.
- **Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons (Block 3.10 / Score: 4 points):** There have been cases of Christians being denied employment for faith-related reasons and of Christian business-owners being discriminated against. Hiring is usually done through recommendation and Lao people usually 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. There have been reports in the WWL 2020 reporting period about Christian factory workers being laid off because of their faith. In another incident, Christian farm workers were denied their daily wages by the village head.
- **Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (Block 3.2 / Score: 3.75 points):** In provinces like Luang Namtha, Phongsaly and Houphan in the north and Savannakhet in the south, the local authorities, especially village leaders, seem determined to wipe out any Christian witness and continue to harass, arrest and evict Christians from their homes. Christianity is seen as a Western phenomenon and a danger to Communist ideology and the nation. Local communities frequently assist in the monitoring of Christian activities.
- **Christians have been fined for faith-related reasons (Block 3.12 / Score: 3.75 points):** Local authorities fine Christians for illegal meetings. In some cases, even materials owned by Christians (e.g. cars and technical equipment) have been confiscated. Christians are often victims of extortion and pastors often give gifts to the authorities at Christmas unasked, just to curry favor with them. Applying for any type of government document might entail requests for extra payment for Christians. Christians who are imprisoned are expected to pay a fine prior to being released. Christians also need to pay a fine in order to retrieve their confiscated items.

*The community expects Christians to take part in Buddhist and animistic ceremonies. The basic 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 village ceremonies, fearing curses from the spirits if some refuse. If they cannot force a Christian to participate, they commonly ask a local Buddhist monk or village spiritual head to curse the Christian and Christians are accused of being divisive.*

*Christians are seen as divergent to the norm. Interviews with families who were expelled from villages reveal that some had neighbors who wanted to convert but were hesitant because they realized that Christianity would 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.*

**National sphere:**

- ***The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Block 4.1 / Score: 4 points):*** 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. Decree 92 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 church to have both 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.
- ***Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public (Block 4.8 / Score: 4 points):*** According to the US Department's International Religious Freedom Report 2018 on page 12: "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." Openly expressing religious or any other views deviating from the government's thinking comes at a high price.
- ***Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered or forbidden (Block 4.9 / Score: 4 points):*** There is no independent civil society in Laos. The government bans all political parties other than the Communist Party; civil society and NGOs have to be registered with the government and cannot openly profess their religious basis and faith.



- ***Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished (Block 4.14 / Score: 4 points):*** In rural areas, the village leader also acts as a judge for the village. Many Christians feel the situation is hopeless because when they experience persecution and raise the issue before the authorities, either nothing happens or the persecution becomes worse, forcing them to leave the village. Officials themselves who persecute Christians often go unpunished. Even when diplomats in Vientiane heard of these situations and raised such cases of abuse with Lao officials, no action was taken against those who caused the harm.

*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, imprisoned or expelled. The media continues to present Christianity as a remnant of the colonial days and a source of anger for the spirits.*

#### **Church sphere:**

***Activities of churches have been monitored, hindered, disturbed or obstructed (Block 5.1 / Score: 4 points):*** All church activities are monitored. Secret police attend services, count the number of people attending and take notes of the sermons and the proceedings. Services in recognized churches are rarely hindered, disturbed or obstructed. As the US State Department's IRF Report 2018 states: "Religious officials said that while Decree 315 helped delineate religious rights, the decree established requirements many religious groups felt were onerous, unrealistic, and used to restrict religious practices." 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.

- ***Churches have been hindered from organizing Christian activities outside church buildings (Block 5.5 / Score: 4 points):*** The government is wary and has refused permission for Christian activities outside church buildings. If the government suspects proselytism, applicants can even be intimidated and fined. According to the US State Department's IRF Report 2018: "With advance permission and a requirement there be no open proselytizing, government authorities permitted Lao and expatriate Christians to organize a public, open-air religious music event for the second year in a row. The Vientiane International Gospel Music Festival took place November 2-4, 2018, at the Vientiane Center shopping mall, with performances by local and foreign artists and bands. LEC officials said, however, the government told the organizers it would be the last time they received a permit to hold the festival. The LEC officials also said that the word 'gospel' was not translated into Lao and only appeared in English-language materials."

- **Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored (Block 5.8 / Score: 4 points):** Authorities do not just monitor the number of Christians in the church but also the teaching. Anything that may sound political can cause trouble for the church. As for published materials, the government can order the removal of these materials if they are seen as threat to national security. Local authorities have raided churches and confiscated Bibles and other Christian literature. Churches need to submit detailed reports in order to get permission from local authorities to meet for worship.
- Pastors have been frequently targeted for arbitrary arrests, detention, abduction and at times torture. Monitoring is ubiquitous and pastors are often called to the local police station just to harass and intimidate them. The problem mainly lies with the regional and city governments. Regional governments and local officials target pastors and leaders and their families to prevent them from spreading the Christian faith.
- **Churches have been hindered in importing Christian materials (Block 5.13 / Score: 4 points):** All Christian materials published (or imported legally) need to be approved by both the government and the LEC. The government controls written materials for mass consumption for religious use and prohibits the import or export of unapproved printed or electronic religious materials.

*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 the case in northern provinces. In some rural areas, a local officer is even required to attend worship in order to monitor the Christians. Even 75% of the LEC congregations throughout the country do not have permanent church structures and conduct worship services in homes, according to the US State Department's Country Report 2017. 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. Pastors have been frequently targeted for arbitrary arrests, detention, abduction and at times torture. Monitoring is ubiquitous and pastors are often called to the local police station, just to harass and intimidate them. The problem mainly lies with the regional and city governments. Regional governments and local officials target pastors and leaders and their families to prevent them from spreading the Christian faith.*

## Violence

*The following table is based on reported cases as much as possible. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given. (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 1000 could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain.) In cases where it is clear that (many) more Christians are affected, but a concrete number could be given according to the number of incidents reported, the number given has to be understood as being an absolutely minimum figure.*

Laos	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2020	01 Nov 2018 - 31 Oct 2019	0	12	32	5	4
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.*

For the WWL 2020 reporting period:

- **Christians attacked:** There were several cases where Christians were attacked and expelled from their communities for "proselytizing".
- **Christians arrested:** At least 12 Christians were detained around Christmas 2018. Three US Christians were [detained](#) for distributing Christian materials in Luang Namtha province in April 2019 and deported after a week. There were also reports of more Hmong Christians being detained and arrested.
- **Churches attacked:** There have been reports about church buildings being attacked and some destroyed in the provinces of Bokeo, Luang Prabang and Luang Namtha. For security reasons, no details can be given.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** There have been fields taken away from Christians, effectively cutting them and their families off from their source of livelihood.

## 5 Year trends

There has been an upward trend in both pressure and violence against Christians in Laos over the last five WWL reporting periods, as can be seen in the following three charts.

### Chart 1:

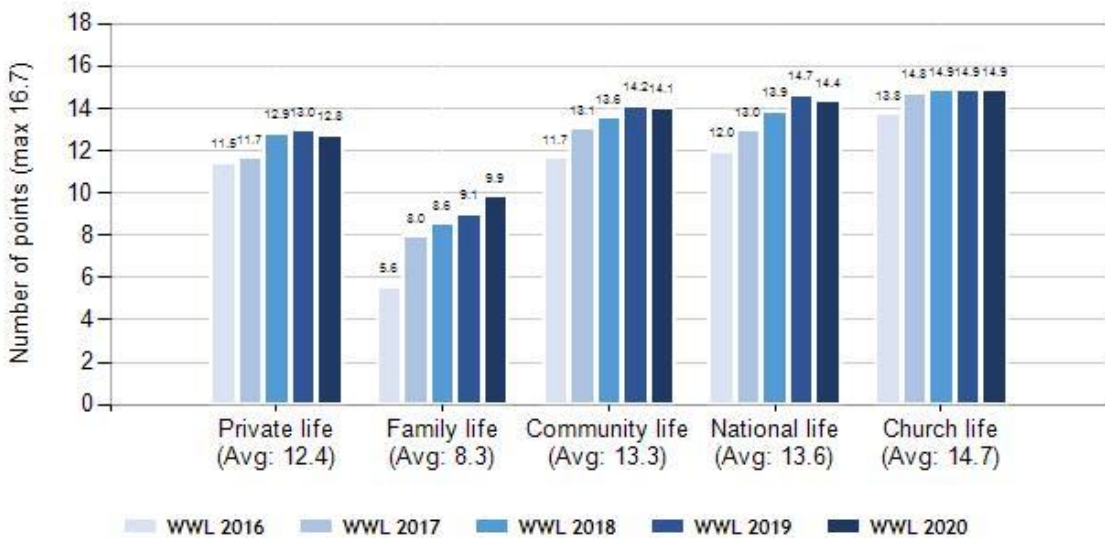
The table below shows that the average level of pressure has increased every year from 10.9 points in WWL 2016 to 13.2 points in WWL 2019 and is now levelling off at the 13.2 mark.

WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern history: Laos	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2020	13.2
2019	13.2
2018	12.8
2017	12.1
2016	10.9

**Chart 2:**

Despite the rises in pressure, Chart 2 below 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 and is levelling off at an extreme level, too. 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.

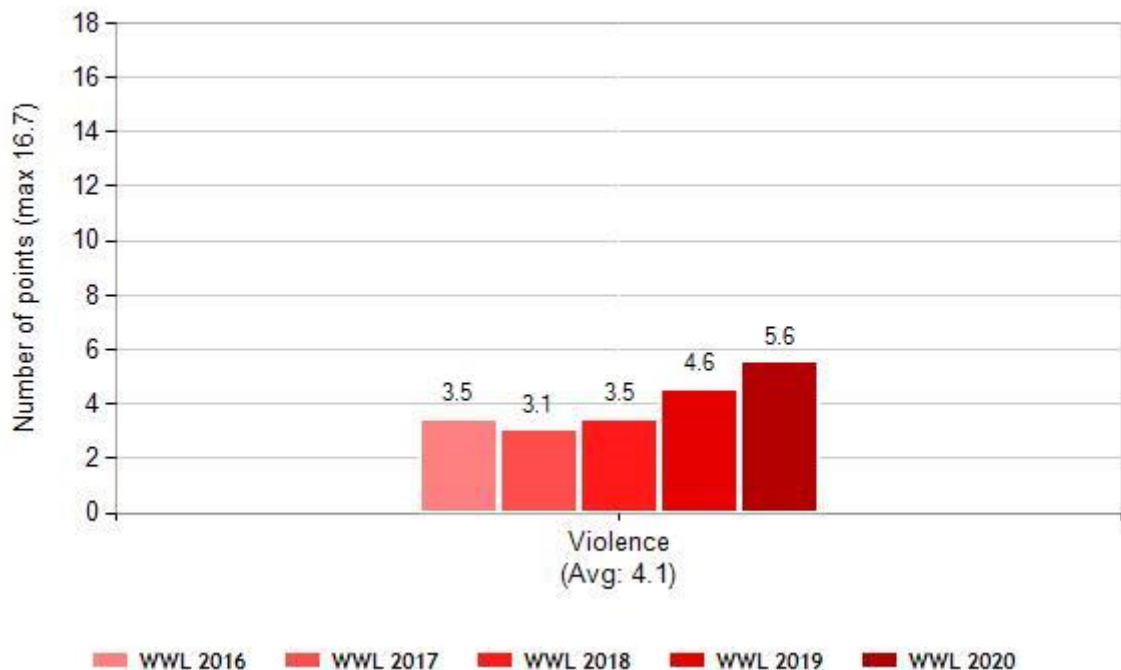
WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern for Laos (Spheres of life)



**Chart 3:**

Violence against Christians has never been very pronounced in Laos, but has always played a role and is slowly growing (although the increase may partly be explained by an improved reporting), especially by churches being closed and Christians expelled from village communities. Reporting from Laos remains a challenge, however, therefore the higher violence score does not necessarily mean more violence, but more reports.

WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern for Laos (Violence)



## Gender profile of persecution

### Female Pressure Points:

- ***Denied access to Christian religious material***
- ***Denied access to social community/networks***
- ***Forced divorce***
- ***Forced marriage***
- ***Forced to flee town/country/Incarceration by government***
- ***Violence – physical***
- ***Violence – sexual***

While Christian men and women tend to suffer equal levels of social ostracism and pressures in Laos, there are areas of [additional vulnerability](#) for Christian women. Christian women face the danger of being beaten, raped and sexually harassed, although such instances generally are not openly discussed (primarily because of the ensuing shame victims feel).

Since they are not in positions of formal leadership, women instead face more hidden forms of pressure and violence, such as social isolation, or arranged marriages - still common practice among many Lao tribal groups. It is understood that these marriages are made with both cultural, as well as religious motivations, in mind. Converts are forced to marry non-Christians in the hope that they will turn back from their Christian faith.

Since Christian men are commonly arrested and detained for their faith, women suffer economically from the loss of the breadwinner, as well as emotionally as a wife. The families must usually pay considerable sums of money to secure their release, paralyzing them financially further. Without the aid of her husband, the woman is left with the burden of providing for their family or finding shelter in the event that the village chief evicts them from the village. Women are not exempt from the danger of arrest themselves; an elderly woman was arrested in December of 2018.

**Male Pressure Points:**

- ***Economic harassment via fines***
- ***Economic harassment via work/job/business***
- ***Incarceration by government***
- ***Military/militia conscription/service against conscience***
- ***Violence – physical***

Church leadership in Laos tends to be dominated by men, a role that has become a target for persecution. Pastors are vulnerable to attacks on churches and to incarceration by authorities. Once detained, their families (or church congregations) often have to pay considerable amounts of money to ensure their release. The economic pressure of these fines, 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 breadwinners in Laos. While detained, leaders report harsh and degrading treatment.

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.

## **Persecution of other religious minorities**

Decree 315, implemented by the Laotian government (see "National sphere" above), has consequences for other religious groups like Buddhists or animists, and not just for 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 for the church

The outlook for Christians as 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.
- **Clan and 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 themselves 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.

## External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics

- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life : Law on Associations - [https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/17/joint-letter-lao-government-re-decree-](https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/17/joint-letter-lao-government-re-decree)
- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life : Law on Associations - [https://international.la-croix.com/news/push-against-lao-decree/8642?utm\\_source=Newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=16-10-2018&utm\\_campaign=newsletter\\_crx\\_lci&PMID=58d1f792a26689dfa2699c74ec4d75ae](https://international.la-croix.com/news/push-against-lao-decree/8642?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=16-10-2018&utm_campaign=newsletter_crx_lci&PMID=58d1f792a26689dfa2699c74ec4d75ae)
- Violence: detained - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/christians-detained-04162019180934.html>
- Gender profile of persecution: additional vulnerability - <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/LA.pdf>

## Additional reports and articles

### WWR in-depth reports

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

At the time of publication there were no items specifically for Laos.

### World Watch Monitor news articles

Articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/laos>.

### Recent country developments

Up-to-date articles are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Laos>  
(password: freedom).