

World
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Laos: Country Dossier

December 2020



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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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research@od.org

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Introduction

World Watch List 2021

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	94	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.2	94	93	94	93	89
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.3	9.8	92	92	91	91	91
4	Libya	15.6	15.4	15.9	16.3	16.3	12.4	92	90	87	86	78
5	Pakistan	13.9	14.2	15.1	14.9	13.5	16.7	88	88	87	86	88
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	11.1	88	87	86	86	82
7	Yemen	16.6	16.6	16.5	16.7	16.7	3.9	87	85	86	85	85
8	Iran	14.5	14.5	13.9	15.7	16.5	10.6	86	85	85	85	85
9	Nigeria	13.3	13.2	13.9	14.1	14.1	16.7	85	80	80	77	78
10	India	13.0	12.9	13.5	14.9	13.7	15.4	83	83	83	81	73
11	Iraq	13.6	14.6	14.2	14.8	13.8	11.5	82	76	79	86	86
12	Syria	13.3	13.9	13.5	14.5	14.0	12.0	81	82	82	76	86
13	Sudan	13.4	13.4	13.7	13.6	15.7	9.1	79	85	87	87	87
14	Saudi Arabia	15.1	13.9	14.4	15.8	16.6	2.2	78	79	77	79	76
15	Maldives	15.4	15.5	13.9	15.8	16.6	0.4	77	78	78	78	76
16	Egypt	12.5	13.2	11.5	12.7	11.0	14.1	75	76	76	70	65
17	China	12.6	9.7	12.0	13.2	15.4	11.1	74	70	65	57	57
18	Myanmar	11.9	12.0	13.1	12.9	12.3	11.9	74	73	71	65	62
19	Vietnam	12.1	8.8	12.7	14.0	14.5	10.0	72	72	70	69	71
20	Mauritania	14.3	14.0	13.5	14.1	13.6	1.9	71	68	67	57	55
21	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	1.3	71	73	74	73	71
22	Laos	12.1	10.2	13.6	13.5	14.3	6.9	71	72	71	67	64
23	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.5	70	70	69	68	67
24	Algeria	13.9	13.9	11.5	13.1	13.4	3.9	70	73	70	58	58
25	Turkey	12.5	11.5	10.8	13.3	11.6	9.3	69	63	66	62	57
26	Tunisia	12.0	13.1	10.4	11.5	13.2	7.4	67	64	63	62	61
27	Morocco	12.6	13.5	11.2	12.4	14.1	3.7	67	66	63	51	49
28	Mali	9.4	8.2	12.7	10.3	11.5	15.4	67	66	68	59	59
29	Qatar	14.0	13.9	10.8	13.1	14.1	1.5	67	66	62	63	66
30	Colombia	11.4	8.8	12.4	11.0	9.7	13.9	67	62	58	56	53
31	Bangladesh	11.5	10.3	13.0	11.3	10.1	10.6	67	63	58	58	63
32	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.0	9.4	11.8	14.3	67	66	48	-	-
33	Tajikistan	14.0	12.3	11.9	12.5	13.2	2.2	66	65	65	65	58
34	Nepal	12.4	9.7	9.9	13.0	12.3	8.5	66	64	64	64	53
35	CAR	9.0	8.6	13.1	9.6	9.9	15.6	66	68	70	61	58
36	Ethiopia	9.9	8.5	10.7	10.3	10.8	14.4	65	63	65	62	64
37	Mexico	10.3	8.1	12.4	10.7	10.3	12.6	64	60	61	59	57
38	Jordan	13.1	13.9	11.4	11.6	12.4	2.0	64	64	65	66	63
39	Brunei	13.9	14.6	10.7	10.9	13.5	0.7	64	63	63	64	64
40	DRC	8.0	7.9	11.2	9.4	11.6	16.1	64	56	55	33	-
41	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	11.0	12.5	13.4	2.4	64	64	63	63	56
42	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.0	12.3	15.7	64	60	54	38	-
43	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	11.9	12.7	13.8	0.0	64	61	64	62	61
44	Oman	13.2	13.5	10.3	12.5	13.0	0.9	63	62	59	57	53
45	Mozambique	9.3	7.6	11.3	7.9	11.1	16.1	63	43	43	-	-
46	Malaysia	12.1	14.3	12.9	11.5	10.0	2.4	63	62	60	65	60
47	Indonesia	11.5	11.4	12.4	10.7	9.3	7.8	63	60	65	59	55
48	Kuwait	13.2	13.5	9.9	12.2	13.2	1.1	63	62	60	61	57
49	Kenya	11.7	9.2	10.5	8.0	10.3	12.8	62	61	61	62	68
50	Comoros	12.5	11.1	11.4	11.3	14.2	1.9	62	57	56	56	56

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
51	Cuba	10.9	7.7	11.8	12.9	13.4	5.4	62	52	49	49	47
52	Sri Lanka	12.2	9.1	11.7	12.2	9.7	7.0	62	65	58	57	55
53	UAE	13.4	13.3	9.7	12.0	12.4	1.1	62	60	58	58	55
54	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.6	10.6	62	60	52	45	47
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.2	10.4	12.0	1.3	58	57	56	54	48
56	Palestinian Territories	12.5	13.3	9.1	10.4	11.7	0.9	58	60	57	60	64
57	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	10.2	58	55	52	53	59
58	Russian Federation	12.3	8.0	10.2	10.5	12.1	3.9	57	60	60	51	46
59	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.0	56	56	56	56	57
60	Bahrain	12.1	12.5	9.1	10.7	10.5	0.9	56	55	55	57	54
61	Azerbaijan	12.8	9.8	9.4	11.1	12.6	0.0	56	57	57	57	52
62	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	3.7	53	56	48	40	-
63	Nicaragua	6.9	4.6	9.9	11.3	10.0	8.1	51	41	41	-	-
64	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.9	48	48	43	-	-
65	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	12.0	47	48	47	46	53
66	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	5.9	47	45	46	-	-
67	Honduras	6.8	5.0	10.6	7.6	9.0	7.6	46	39	38	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	10.1	11.4	7.2	46	43	42	-	-
69	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.0	43	44	44	-	-
70	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	0.6	43	43	43	-	-
71	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	9.8	0.7	43	41	42	-	-
72	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	8.1	42	42	41	-	-
73	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.3	42	42	43	-	-
74	El Salvador	6.6	4.9	9.8	4.2	8.7	7.8	42	38	30	-	-

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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 2021 reporting period was 01 October 2019 - 30 September 2020.
- 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).

Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

In the WWL 2021 reporting period, travel restrictions and other measures introduced by the governments of various countries to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic did cause delays and create the need for restructuring grass-roots research in some cases. Through the agile cooperation of Open Doors field networks, research analysts, external experts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that the WWL 2021 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

External Links - Introduction

- Sources and definitions: World Watch List Documentation - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>

WWL 2021 Short country profile / Laos

Brief country details

Laos: Population (2020 UN estimate)	Christians	Chr%
7,165,000	199,000	2.8

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

Laos: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	71	22
WWL 2020	72	20
WWL 2019	71	19
WWL 2018	67	20
WWL 2017	64	24

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

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

Brief description of the persecution situation

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 consequently conduct worship services in homes. Converts to Christianity bear the brunt of rights violations. They are considered guilty of putting themselves outside the (Buddhist-animist) community and are consequently face pressure and violence from their families (which, in a Laotian household, usually consist 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.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

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

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

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

- Christian communities and their activities are closely monitored by the authorities (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christians face discrimination in employment because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Christian children are forced to receive Buddhist religious education and to participate in religious ceremonies and festivals that are not in line with their religious beliefs (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- The state imposes strict limitations on Christian meetings that go beyond the internationally recognized and permitted limitations (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 21)
- Christians are attacked and expelled from their community for sharing about their faith (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

See above.

Specific examples of positive developments

The central government in Laos took some steps to [educate](#) local and rural authorities about how to protect believers' freedom of religion and belief and churches' freedom to worship (Radio Free Asia, 21 September 2020).

External Links - Short country profile

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of positive developments: educate - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/law-09212020171649.html>

WWL 2021: Keys to understanding / Laos

Link for general background information

- [Laos country profile - BBC News](#)

Recent history

Laos was a French colony until 1953. A power struggle ensued until Communist forces overthrew the constitutional monarchy in 1975, heralding years of isolation. After the changes in the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s, Laos began opening up its economy from 1986 onwards. Despite economic reforms, called the "New Economic Mechanism", the country remains poor and heavily dependent on foreign aid.

Laos has slowly opened up to its neighbors and the international community. It hosted the SEA Games in 2009 and joined the WTO in 2013. In March 2016, Laos took over the annually rotating chair of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) which brought the country into a short-lived international spotlight. 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) 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. This will be one of the reasons why Laos hosted several UN Special Rapporteurs and consultants, as well as others from ASEAN and the EU. Development is now well on its way and Laos has become one of the [fastest growing economies](#) in the East Asian and Pacific region (World Bank overview, April 2020). However, this growth depends greatly on its big investor and neighbor, China, and comes at political and [environmental costs](#) (ASEAN Today, 16 October 2019).

Christians do not so much struggle with the central Communist authorities (although restrictions are passed down from them too); Christians face most difficulties from the local authorities and village leaders who are more concerned with guarding and preserving ethnic practices and keeping up the Communist management style and bureaucracy.

Political and legal landscape

The Communist Party does not plan any changes or even democratic reforms. There is little real hope that religious freedom as stipulated in Lao Constitution will actually be observed and respected right down to village level. 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, although there are efforts to [strengthen](#) the legal framework (US embassy in Laos Press Release, 31 January 2020). Especially local and provincial leaders are slow to implement laws from the central government and supervision is weak. Although there seem to be efforts to improve the way of governing the people of Laos, the Communist Party seems to stick to its traditional patterns of ruling - nepotism and corruption when it comes to the economy, and opaqueness and limitations as far as political and social matters are concerned. The authorities put a high emphasis on controlling and even indoctrinating the people via the [media](#), which cannot be called 'free' at all (UCA News, 19 August 2020). At the same time, the state of the nation has begun to be the topic of conversation on social media (e.g. on Facebook) and even in state-run media.

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 to 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 - 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

Laos: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	199,000	2.8
Muslim	8,100	0.1
Hindu	5,500	0.1

Buddhist	3,815,000	53.2
Ethno-religionist	3,000,000	41.9
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	17,700	0.2
Atheist	21,000	0.3
Agnostic	60,000	0.8
Other	38,820	0.5
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

According to WCD 2020 estimates, 53.2% 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.

The country is still in the tight grip of the Communist Party and therefore religion is something the authorities see as hostile and in need of being controlled. 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, especially in the villages. The government recognizes Christianity as one of the four official religions in Laos. Whereas at the national level, there is an increased cooperation between the government and the registered Lao Evangelical Church (LEC), such recognition is still lacking at village level, and even more so for Christians not under the LEC umbrella. According to the US State Department's Country Report 2019, page 11: "The LEC reported operating approximately 600 churches throughout the country and conducting worship services in many more 'unofficial' house churches. They attributed the large number of house churches to the difficulties of obtaining building permits from local authorities."

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 authority of monks. 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 the preservation of power and position presents a lot of common ground for both sides.

Economic landscape

According to [UNDP 2019 report](#) (page 300 onwards):

- **Gross National Income (2011 PPP USD):** 6.317 USD
- **Poverty:** The rate of multidimensional poverty stands at 9.6%, a further 21.2% are listed as being vulnerable to poverty. Measured by Laos' national poverty line, 23.4% of the population can be seen as poor.
- **Remittances:** Remittances make up 1.5% of the GDP.

According to [World Bank's April 2020 update](#):

- Laos is classified as a lower-middle income country.
- **GDP per capita PPP** (international USD 2017): 7.826
- **GDP growth rate:** 4.7%
- **Poverty:** The poverty gap at 5.50 USD (2011 PPP) a day is 42.9% (last available data from 2012).

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 (Radio Free Asia, 18 April 2018). Those efforts have been thwarted by the arrival of the COVID-19 crisis, although Laos is less connected internationally than other countries. Laos' claim that there have been [almost no infections](#) has been confirmed by international experts, but even then, all efforts at improving the economy and the livelihood of people came effectively to a stop (UCA News, 5 May 2020). And as a still relatively poor country, Laos does not have the means to stimulate its economy or keep it afloat for a long time and [debts](#) will be mounting (Eurasia Review, 17 July 2020).

In all the economic and social development achieved so far, there remains an enormous gap between urban and rural areas, the latter being the least developed particularly in terms of infrastructure (including 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. All this is reflected in the poverty statistics as well as in the numbers for vulnerable employment and malnourished children given below (see section "*Social and cultural landscape*"). A far-reaching anti-corruption campaign had some positive results, but did not eradicate the deeply rooted networks.

Despite progress in developing infrastructure, 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. Many Christians are living in the rural areas as well and therefore share the challenges of poverty and malnourishment.

Additionally, the country may find itself in a catch-22 situation in the foreseeable future: By cooperating with China, foreign investment is available without opening up the economy to market forces; but the price is a growing dependence on China, especially in [external debt](#), a claim heavily disputed by the government (ASEAN Today, 20 June 2019). 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 [collapsed](#), killing dozens of people (New Mandala, 3 August 2018). Questions will be increasingly asked about who exactly is benefitting from projects like this, especially as some 288 dams are planned and promises on an emphasis on [safety and compensation](#) remained empty (ASEAN Today, 27 July 2020). If all - or even just most - of the dams are completed, this may [jeopardize](#) the food and water security of more than 70 million people in several countries (ASEAN Today, 13 August 2020). Work on the [major railway](#) between Laos and China, a part of the latter's Belt and Road Initiative, resumed despite the COVID-19 crisis (ASEAN Today, 17 May 2020). In another sign of its growing dependency on China, Electricité de Laos, the country's largest power grid operator, has started a [joint venture](#) - or as many others see it - has been taken over by a Chinese company (Radio Free Asia, 10 September 2020).

If the ties with China are drawn tighter, 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 (Radio Free Asia, 4 January 2019). Laos tries to diversify its foreign investment and has had some success; for example, South Korea is another large [foreign investor](#) (ASEAN Today, 7 December 2018). However, it often seems that these investments go hand in hand with the fact that the majority of the population does not see anything of the promised growth and wealth.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [UNDP 2019 report](#) (page 300) and the [World Factbook](#) (December 2019):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Lao 53.2%, Khmu 11%, Hmong 9.2%, Phouthay 3.4%, Tai 3.1%, Makong 2.5%, Katong 2.2%, Lue 2%, Akha 1.8%, other 11.6% (2015 est.)
- **Main languages:** Lao (official), French, English, various ethnic languages
- **Urbanization rate:** 35%
- **Literacy rate:** 84.7% (age 15 and above)
- **Mean years of schooling:** 5.2 years
- The pupil-teacher ratio in primary school is 22:1
- Statistically, five physicians are available per 10,000 people and 15 hospital beds.

According to [World Bank's April 2020 update](#):

- 32.3% of all people are below the age of 14, 4.2% are above the age of 65.
- The primary school completion rate is 97.9%.
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 0.63%, the rate for vulnerable employment is 80.1%.
- **Refugees/IDPs:** According to the UN's [IOM](#) (accessed 19 August 2020), 1.3 million Laotians have migrated from their country.
- Malnutrition still affects 30% of all children below five years of age, causing stunted growth.

According to the [UN Global Human Development Indicators](#) (2019):

- **Human Development Index:** With a score of 0.604, Laos ranks 140th of 189 countries in the world, bringing it into the "medium human development" category. The HDI is still improving, growth however slowed down since 2015.
- **Life expectancy:** 67.6 years
- **Median age:** 24.4 years
- **Gender inequality:** With a score of 0.463, Laos ranks 110th of 162 countries in the Gender Inequality Index.
- **Unemployment:** 42.1% of youth (between 15 and 24) are neither in school nor employment

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 a relatively poor and [under-developed](#) country, as can be seen from the figures given above (Global Finance, 30 July 2020). Although the minimum wage was [raised in 2018](#), it is still well below that of its neighbors (ASEAN Briefing, 31 May 2018). Unsurprisingly, seeing how Laos deals with poverty issues, the "working poor" rate stands at a staggering 80%, according to UNDP. Insofar, the surprisingly high GDP of the country is misleading. As there is no free press in the country, there is no public pressure pushing for accountability or decisive action against corruption. 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 visited the country and claimed at the end of June 2019 that the economic model of Laos was doing [nothing to decrease](#) poverty and inequality, the government contradicted this publicly and sharply (ASEAN Today, 4 July 2019). 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.

The crisis surrounding COVID-19 will prove to be an additional burden, especially for the rural areas which are more behind in health infrastructure as the data given above may show. Although the remoteness might be a benefit (as the virus seems not to have reached rural and remote areas), it will hamper development and efforts to improve the situation of the people. Christians are affected by this as well, especially as they are perceived in many villages as being outsiders, following a "foreign religion". Therefore, it is possible that Christians will be excluded from the small amounts of government assistance which the rural areas receive, not necessarily by the national authorities, but by local rulers.

Technological landscape

According to [World Internet Stats](#) (accessed June 2020):

- **Internet usage:** 34.4% penetration - survey date: December 2018
- **Facebook usage:** 30.2% penetration – survey date: December 2018

According to [World Bank's country profile](#) (2018):

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 51.9 per 100 people

Laos is not included in Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net Report 2020](#).

All data supplied should be treated with caution, as Laos is still a somewhat secretive country and all Internet and mobile phone usage has to be seen against the background of a closing, but still existing 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. Infrastructure in the capital is more advanced; rural areas sometimes have no Internet or mobile phone coverage, despite the access rate to electricity being more than 97% even in rural areas.

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](#) (Radio Free Asia, 19 July 2019). Due to such tough restrictions, many Laotians rely on [news](#) from neighboring Thailand and social media, despite the risks and limitations (Radio Free Asia, 13 August 2020). Christians, many of whom live in the rural areas, are naturally facing challenges in accessing online resources.

Security situation

The Laotian government is mainly focused on keeping the economy on a growth trajectory and keeping perceived dissidents in the country in check.

Since efforts for Hmong independence ended in 2007, when the leader of an ethnic insurgency group was arrested, Laos has not faced any particular security challenges. However, the country watches carefully Vietnam's policy of [cracking down](#) on the Hmong - many of whom are Christian (UNPO, 18 April 2019). The Hmong minority in Laos is over 9% of the country's population. Christians often face [harassment](#) and restrictions, but this is not due to any specific security issues (Radio Free Asia, 7 May 2020).

Trends analysis

1) COVID-19 has damaged the economy's upward trajectory

For years, Laos enjoyed one of the highest economic growth rates in Asia, although one could see this as 'borrowed growth' bought from China and its major infrastructure projects. As a land-locked country, Laos is and will remain dependent on its larger neighbors Vietnam and China, as it needs access to the sea for trading. Social development has not kept pace with the economic progress, but it has seen some improvements over the last years, despite the all challenges still remaining. However, all these hopeful developments - including the expected promotion from 'Least-developed' country status by 2024 - may be derailed by the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis. Even if it seems to be true that Laos is less affected by the pandemic itself, the worldwide economic downturn will affect the country severely. Rural areas and the poor in society will feel the consequences first.

2) The dependency on China has serious consequences

Laos has made itself very dependent on loans and aid received from its big neighbor China. This not only carries the risk of falling into a debt trap - a risk other countries have found themselves in already - but also has much more immediate environmental and social consequences, as the example of the [Mekong](#) shows (UCA News, 12 May 2020). However, it is not just China building dams in the country, other countries are also involved. There are also extensive plantations run by foreign companies (many of which are Chinese) for exporting fruit. Such projects do not usually take into account more long-term costs.

In the prevailing economic situation, Laos may not see any other option but to rely even more on China. This in turn would mean that the country would not be encouraged to pay much attention to freedom of religion issues or the situation of religious minorities. Both Chinese and Laotian leaders are following a policy of increasingly emphasizing Communist ideology. It could also mean that the gradually increasing government openness may be halted. As one country observer recently stated: "[Transparency and accountability](#) are not words I would use to describe Laos" (ASEAN Today, 13 August 2020). Christians can feel this in everyday life, too, and might see more of it as China's influence grows.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: Laos country profile - BBC News - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15351898>
- Recent history: fastest growing economies - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lao/overview>
- Recent history: environmental costs - <https://www.aseantoday.com/2019/10/chinese-owned-banana-plantations-expand-in-laos-despite-lingering-environmental-and-health-concerns/>
- Political and legal landscape: strengthen - <https://la.usembassy.gov/u-s-launches-new-program-to-strengthen-the-rule-of-law-in-laos/>
- Political and legal landscape: media - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/journalism-a-tool-of-indoctrination-in-communist-laos/89200>
- Economic landscape: UNDP 2019 report - <http://www.hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf>
- Economic landscape: World Bank's April 2020 update - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lao>
- Economic landscape: announced - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/ldc-04182018152511.html>
- Economic landscape: almost no infections - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/secretive-laos-reports-very-few-covid-19-cases/87907>

- Economic landscape: debts - <https://www.eurasiareview.com/17072020-laos-has-tackled-covid-19-but-it-is-drowning-in-debt-to-international-finance-oped/>
- Economic landscape: external debt - <https://www.aseantoday.com/2019/06/can-laos-manage-its-debt-to-china/>
- Economic landscape: collapsed - <http://www.newmandala.org/lao-dam-collapse-tragedy-long-making/>
- Economic landscape: safety and compensation - <https://www.aseantoday.com/2020/07/a-broken-dam-and-broken-promises-laos-doubles-down-on-hydropower-despite-risks/>
- Economic landscape: jeopardize - <https://www.aseantoday.com/2020/08/new-mekong-dam-ignores-threats-to-unesco-world-heritage-city-livelihoods-and-ecosystems/>
- Economic landscape: major railway - <https://www.aseantoday.com/2020/05/work-resumes-on-china-laos-railway-full-steam-ahead-for-beijings-belt-and-road/>
- Economic landscape: joint venture - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/grid-09102020153801.html>
- 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: UNDP 2019 report - <http://www.hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: Word Factbook - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/attachments/summaries/LA-summary.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Bank's April 2020 update - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lao>
- Social and cultural landscape: IOM - <https://www.iom.int/countries/lao-peoples-democratic-republic>
- Social and cultural landscape: UN Global Human Development Indicators - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/LAO>
- 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: World Internet Stats - <https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#la>
- Technological landscape: World Bank's country profile - https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=LAO
- Technological landscape: Freedom on the Net Report 2020 - <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2020/pandemics-digital-shadow>
- Technological landscape: registered - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/register-07192019160935.html>
- Technological landscape: news - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/media-08132020172329.html>
- Security situation: cracking down - <https://unpo.org/article/21467>
- Security situation: harassment - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/harassed-05072020170409.html>
- Trends analysis: Mekong - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/chinas-mekong-dams-have-grave-consequences-for-se-asia/87996>
- Trends analysis: Transparency and accountability - <https://www.aseantoday.com/2020/08/new-mekong-dam-ignores-threats-to-unesco-world-heritage-city-livelihoods-and-ecosystems/>

WWL 2021: 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](#) be established at Ban Dorn Don on an island in the Mekong River (UCA News, Apostolic Vicariate of Pakse, accessed 9 December 2020).

[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 (LEC History, accessed 9 December 2020).

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

Church spectrum today

Laos: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	47,000	23.6
Protestant	150,000	75.4
Independent	1,500	0.8
Unaffiliated	90	0.0
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	198,590	99.8
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	145,000	72.9
Renewalist movement	18,000	9.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

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:** Christians 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.

Major denominations are the Roman Catholic Church, Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) and the Seventh Day Adventists. Many other churches are also active, for instance, Evangelical, Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist, Lutheran and Assemblies of God.

External Links - Church information

- Christian origins: mission station - <https://www.ucanews.com/directory/dioceses/laos-pakse/375>
- Christian origins: Presbyterian Christians - <https://laoevangelicalchurch.com/lec-history/>

WWL 2021: Persecution Dynamics / Laos

Reporting period

1 October 2019 - 30 September 2020

Position on the World Watch List

Laos: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	71	22
WWL 2020	72	20
WWL 2019	71	19
WWL 2018	67	20
WWL 2017	64	24

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods

The drop by one point in WWL 2021 compared to WWL 2020 was caused by a slightly more open approach of the national government towards Christians and churches and thus, a reduction in scores in *National* and *Church life* being reported. The pressure exerted on Christians by (mainly local) state authorities and a very strong pressure on converts from family, friends, neighbors and the local authorities remained more or less at the same level. By putting very high pressure on Christians, Laos follows the example set by other countries still ruled by Communist parties - especially its big neighbor, China.

Persecution engines

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

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

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

Laos is one of the five remaining Marxist-Leninist countries in the world; it staunchly sticks to Communist ideology and as such is strictly opposed to any influence deemed foreign or Western. In order to keep control, the Communist Party puts enormous pressure on society, including the small Christian minority. Per definition, it has a negative view of Christians, but has recognized Christianity as one of the four official religions, although it is seen as a Western ideology that challenges Communism. The Lao government controls all information, including newspapers and radio. The state pressure, apart from being monitored, is most strongly felt from the provincial to the village level of leadership. The Communist Party - rather than a single ruling politician - will however do everything necessary to stay in power. Christians therefore should stay within tacitly understood guidelines and there are limits not to be crossed if Christians want to avoid negative reactions from officials. Local authorities often make use of society's hostile attitude towards Christians to justify acting against them.

Clan oppression (Very strong):

Animism and other tribal practices are observed in tribal villages, especially in rural areas (which make up at least 60% of the country's territory). Abandoning tribal practices for Christian faith is seen as betrayal. Village leaders and family members in some areas see it necessary to expel Christians from their communities because of their fear that this foreign faith will anger the

guardian spirits. This occurs, for instance, when Christians refuse to cremate their dead. Local officials are also known to force Christians to renounce their faith and village leaders sometimes summon the local authorities to arrest Christians, although the authorities may be less driven by preserving age-old norms and values and more by 'keeping the peace' in the village.

Drivers of persecution

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

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

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

- **Government officials (Very strong):** The rights of Christians are regularly violated by the Communist government authorities - most often at the provincial and local levels - as the Christian faith is seen as disturbing the communal peace in a village.
- **Political parties (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 see Christianity in particular as being connected with the West. They therefore oppose Christians.

- **Ethnic group and Non-Christian religious leaders (Medium and Weak):** At least on paper, these leaders heed Communist doctrine, so when they put pressure on Christians, the authorities are not likely to stop them, especially when their ultimate goal is to preserve peace in the village. Occasionally, Buddhist monks have spoken out against Christians, but their role is nowhere near as significant as that of many of their peers in Myanmar or Sri Lanka.

Drivers of Clan oppression:

- **Extended family (Very strong):** Converts to Christianity experience persecution from their own family on a very frequent basis. The decision to stop following customary animistic rites has far-reaching consequences and puts converts outside a closely-knit society, especially as Laos is predominantly rural and the culture is one of honor and shame.
- **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. This is done as a means to preserve their tribal culture and ultimately their authority in their tribe.
- **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 at the local level are often complicit in community action against Christians by remaining silent or by supporting the action, sometimes even despite higher orders to the contrary.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Provinces like Luang Namtha, Phongsaly and Houphan in the north (where the Hmong minority is also concentrated), Khammuane and Savannakhet in the south have traditionally been difficult places for Christians. The local authorities in these areas still seem very determined to silence 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, the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) and the Seventh Day Adventists: Although these churches are officially recognized by the authorities, they are monitored and - in the case of the LEC - face restrictions in choosing their own leaders and printing Christian materials. The government has

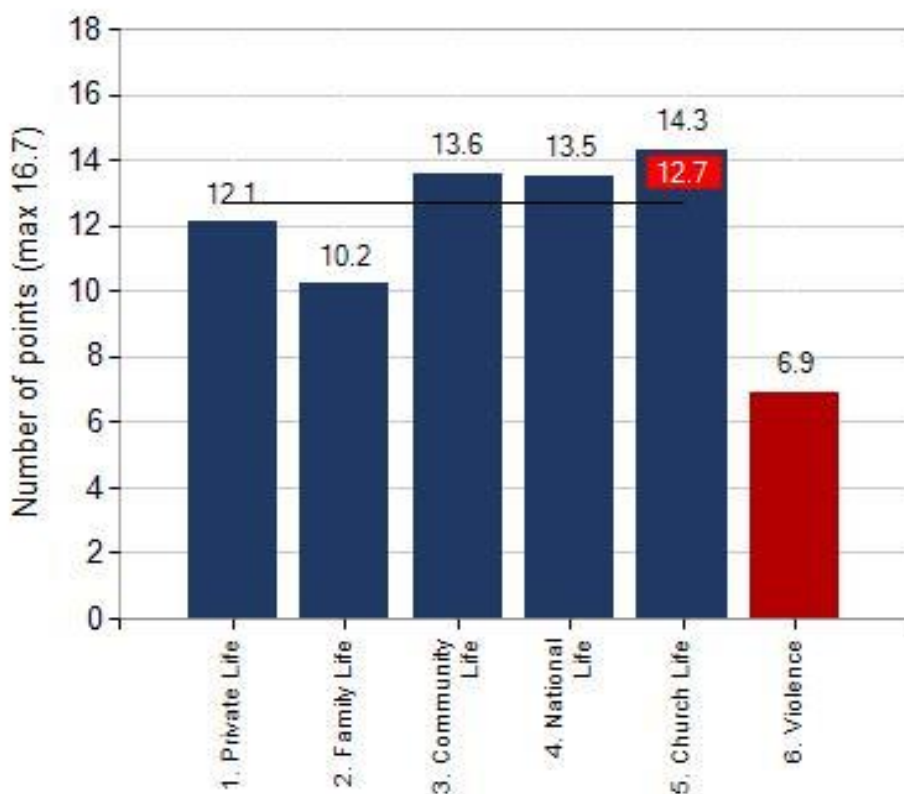
reportedly forced historical churches to monitor local non-registered churches, but the extent of this is unknown.

Converts to Christianity: Converts come from a Buddhist or Ethnic-animist background and are facing the strongest levels of pressure and violence of all categories of Christian communities. They are targeted by the local authorities and by families, friends and neighbors. Since every conversion is an indication that Christianity is growing, the government - again more at the local level - will act harshly where there are reports conversions.

Non-traditional Christian communities: Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations, Methodists, Mennonites, Lutherans, Assemblies of God and many other denominations exist in Laos. As the government does not allow "illegal" gatherings, all these groups need to register under one of the three government-recognized churches mentioned above. Congregations that do not, have to meet clandestinely. Members of those churches also face discrimination at various levels of society. Some of the aforementioned denominations have tried to register, but in vain. As one country expert put it: "They are normally not harassed unless they start to grow in new areas."

The Persecution pattern

WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern for Laos



The WWL 2021 Persecution pattern for Laos shows:

- The average pressure on Christians over all *Spheres of life* is at the very high level of 12.7 points, a 0.5 point decrease compared to WWL 2020.

- Pressure is strongest (and at an extreme level) in the *Church, Community* and *National 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*. The pressure in the two latter spheres decreased because the central government started a training program on how to guarantee freedom of religion and belief for local authorities. Although more consequences on the ground need to be seen, this program has already had some positive effect.
- The violence score increased from 5.6 points in WWL 2020 to 6.9 points in WWL 2021. In WWL 2021, there were more reports of churches and houses of Christians being attacked and destroyed.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2021 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.75 points)

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. There have been cases in the WWL 2021 reporting period where Christians have been reported to the village authorities, so most of them will be very careful in what and to whom they are sharing.

Block 1.9: It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians. (3.50 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. As Christians are closely watched, meetings with others are always noted and visits from Christians coming from outside the village are even more difficult. 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.

Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.25 points)

Converts, who come mostly from an animist background, almost always experience strong opposition from their families and village upon their conversion. They are mocked for following a 'foreign' belief. They face being disowned and can be told to leave their village. Opposition comes from the family and community, who are often afraid that a convert is angering the spirits, but it often comes additionally from the local authorities, sometimes with support of the police, who have an interest in keeping peace in the village. In one example from the WWL 2021 reporting period, a whole family converted after a man was healed through prayer. The village head disapproved and started confiscating property belonging to the man and cut off the family's water and electricity supply. This caused mental health problems and the village head ordered the man's family to put him in a cage saying the man's condition could otherwise endanger other people in the village.

Block 1.7: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members. (3.25 points)

Although it depends on the individual family and sometimes even on the individual family members, in general, a conversion to Christianity is a huge challenge for traditional and animistic belief. What is more, it is also a shame and honor issue, so converts who openly speak about their faith risk being pressured to re-convert. There have been instances in the WWL 2021 reporting period, where converts have been threatened and, after insisting on staying true to the Christian faith, of being expelled from their homes and even from the village.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.75 points)

Buddhist teachings are often considered to be part of Lao culture and are therefore part of the standard curriculum in schools. Christian students can be required to attend Buddhist temple rituals or be taught animist practices. 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. Consequently, some have been denied the possibility of progressing to high school studies.

Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (3.50 points)

Baptisms are one of the most visible signs of a vivid and growing church and therefore have to be carried out with the utmost caution, especially when taking place in rural areas. Even the LEC is not able carry out baptisms freely throughout the country.

Block 2.5: Burials of Christians have been hindered or coercively performed with non-Christian rites. (3.00 points)

At 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 are expected to do this too. For Christians with a Buddhist background, it is also difficult to avoid Buddhist practices being observed during burial ceremonies. In some cases, Christians have been denied outright the use of communal burial places for their deceased. In one case, the Christians had to pay an extra fee and were finally allowed access. In other cases, Christians have to find a place outside the village boundaries.

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.00 points)

See comments for Block 2.8 above. Also, Christian children are sometimes made to drop out of school by putting pressure on them. If they keep attending school, their peers often bully them as they are seen as being different. There have also been reports of Christian students being overlooked in the distribution of school meals, with teachers telling them that "their Jesus should look after them". In the WWL 2021 reporting period, at least in one school, Christian children received food just like everybody else.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (3.75 points)

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. Many Christians believe that their phones are tapped, although this is hard to prove. In one province, however, the police asked church leaders (who are monitored more intensely) to provide photos, phone numbers and other details of pastors and leaders in order to facilitate monitoring.

Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.75 points)

There have been cases of Christians being denied employment for faith-related reasons and of Christian business-owners being discriminated against. Hiring workers is usually done through recommendation and Lao people like to recommend someone from their own family. In this way, Christians are excluded from most jobs. And if they are employed somewhere, they often hide their faith in order to avoid discrimination and abuse. There have been reports in the WWL 2021 reporting period about converts losing their jobs given to them by the village head, when their conversion became known. One Lao Christian stated: "If you work with the government, all officials at your workplace will try to convince or threaten you to convert from Christianity to Buddhism." There have been many cases in the WWL 2021 reporting period, where Christians, once discovered, were either dismissed (in the army), lost the opportunity to be promoted (when in government service), were threatened to lose government benefits or they and their relatives had their work contracts terminated.

Block 3.6: Christians have been hindered in participating in communal institutions, forums, etc., for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

Christians are normally reluctant to participate in communal institutions and village meetings as they are often peppered with religious elements. On the hand, Christians are also often hindered in joining such meetings as villagers and local authorities believe that their mere presence will anger the spirits and bring bad luck to the community. In one incident, a Christian just passing by was apprehended by villagers and accused of being "an American spy".

Block 3.12: Christians have been fined for faith-related reasons (e.g. jizya tax, community tax, protection money). (3.50 points)

Local authorities fine Christians for illegal meetings. In some cases, 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 can entail requests for extra payment for Christians. Whereas any citizen has to make this payment (or give a bribe), it can increase ten-fold for a Christian. Sometimes, Christians are also made to pay the police for their own monitoring (and for being able to meet and worship).

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

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

Article 9 of the Constitution (amended in 2003) states that it is the duty of the State to respect and protect all religions and particularly mentions Buddhists and Buddhist monks. 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. But in a positive development, the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have started working hard to educate provincial and local officials about Laos' obligation to Article 18 UDHR. Once these efforts bear fruit, the score for Block 4.1 should fall.

Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (4.00 points)

Openly expressing religious or any other views deviating from the government's thinking comes at a high price. Even social media, although allowing more room to express thoughts, is tightly monitored. And as one country expert said: "In Lao culture most people do not express their views or opinions in public. Most statements are indirect and come through a third party."

Christians also follow the cultural norms and often self-censor their views on politics and on issues relating to the government."

Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (4.00 points)

There is no independent civil society in Laos. NGOs have to be registered with the government and cannot openly profess their religious basis and faith. The Decree on Association that took effect in January 2018 fundamentally abolished freedom for NGOs to develop and implement their activities. It also required all associations (including religious denominations or groups) to be legally registered and regulated by the government, including reporting of and government's approval on sources of funds. The decree gave power for the government to prosecute members or people who are part of unregistered associations. Activities of NGOs should be pre-approved by government ministries and are limited to specific areas of social work. Article 31 of the Decree specifies the prohibitions of associations; these prohibitions include activities that threaten local and ethnic traditions (which can easily be misused against Christians and church work in tribal communities). The government bans all political parties other than the Communist Party.

Block 4.2: Officials have refused to recognize an individual's conversion as recorded in government administration systems, identify cards (etc.). (3.00 points)

There are many cases reported where converts would run into trouble with the authorities when trying to obtain their family books, ID card, any kind of permission, when dealing with the police, when registering for school etc.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (4.00 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. Even police officers in uniform sometimes openly monitor churches. Services in recognized churches are rarely hindered, disturbed or obstructed. The government is slightly more tolerant of religious practices in urban areas but has often acted severely in rural areas, where local officials and police often interfere with the right to worship in a number of places and are aware of all groups that meet for worship. In one example from the WWL 2021 reporting period, seven police officers visited the church service of an LEC-affiliated church. One of the officers even knew some of the songs which were sung during worship. The officers took photos and videos of the service. Afterwards, they confiscated the Bibles, song books and an SD card from a Christian's mobile phone. They also interrogated the Christians present, asking questions about how much a pastor is paid and how much money is in the collection every Sunday.

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

Conversion is seriously discouraged in many ways and while converts who stick resolutely to their new-found faith, may finally be able to attend a church, there are reports that the police and the Ministry for Home Affairs earnestly reminded churches not to proselytize in surrounding

villages. There are also places, especially in the northern provinces, where the district authorities force churches on an almost weekly basis to give the names of those attending the church.

Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (4.00 points)

All Christian preaching and teaching is closely monitored. All materials used need to be reported to the local authorities to be checked, and preachers and teachers need to be officially recognized as such and carry an ID card issued by the LEC.

Block 5.13: Churches have been hindered in importing Christian materials from abroad. (4.00 points)

Churches are not allowed to import Christian materials from abroad. The government has to approve all Christian books and other materials that are to be used and sold in the country.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible. 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. The symbol "x" denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security considerations.

Laos: Violence Block question	WWL 2021	WWL 2020
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2 How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	8	5
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	17	30
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	1	2
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	0	0

Laos: Violence Block question	WWL 2021	WWL 2020
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	30	12
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	30	2
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	2
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	40	20
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	0	0

For the WWL 2020 reporting period:

Christians attacked: There have been several cases where converts were expelled from their communities, almost all also included attacks against Christians.

- **Christians arrested:** At least 17 Christians were arrested in March, July and September 2020. There were also reports of more Hmong Christians being detained.
- **Churches attacked:** There have been reports of about eight church buildings being attacked and some destroyed in the provinces of Salavan, Sekong 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. In one case, the rice storage place of a Christian was deliberately set on fire.

5 Year trends

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

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Laos: WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2021	12.7
2020	13.2
2019	13.2
2018	12.8
2017	12.1

The table above shows that the average level of pressure has been very high throughout the last 5 WWL reporting periods. Pressure in WWL 2021 is at the lowest level since WWL 2017.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

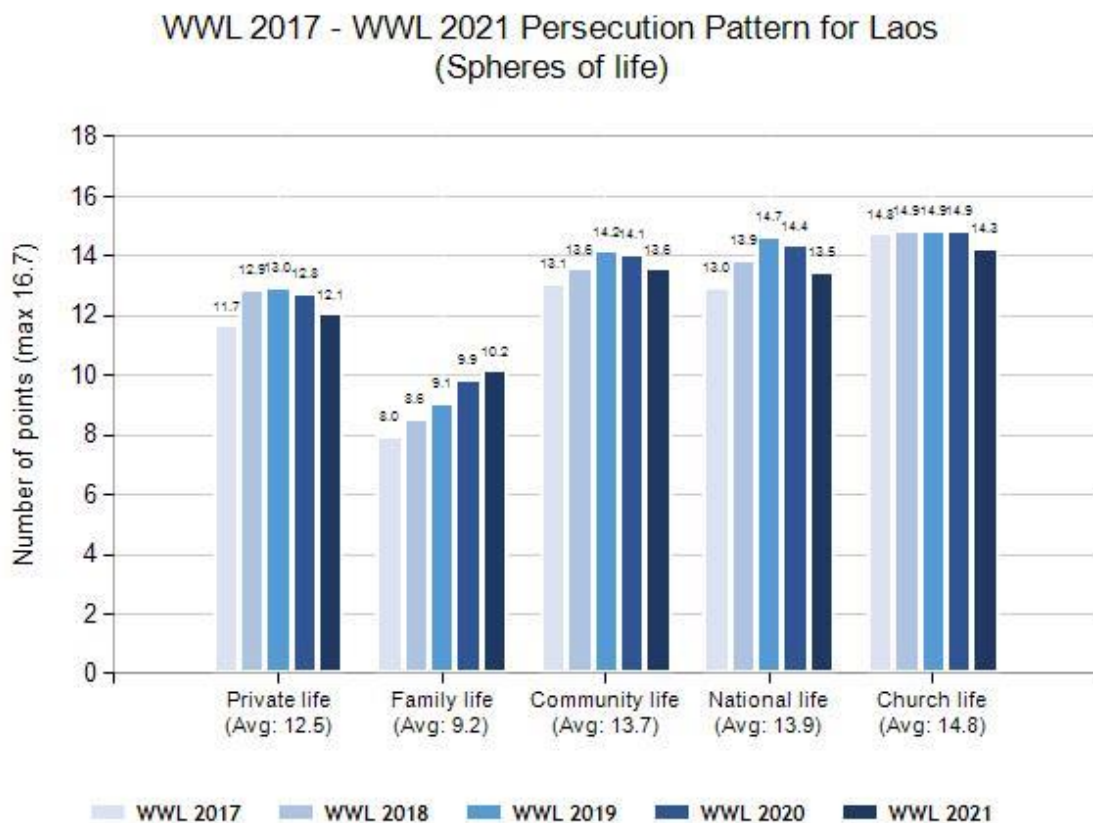
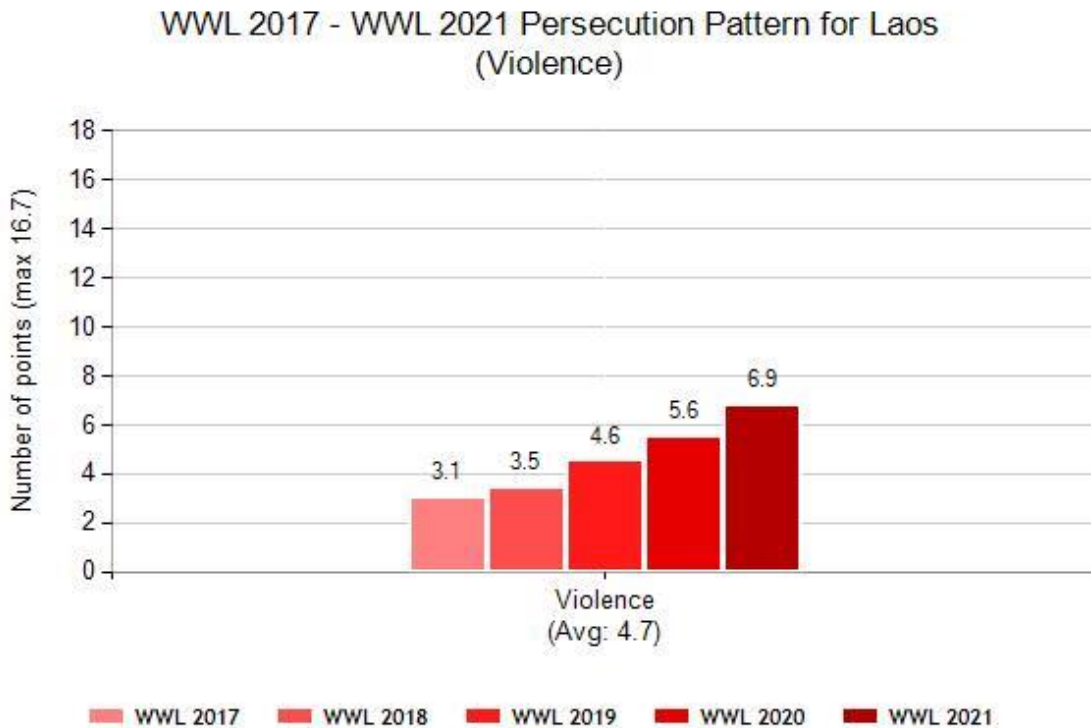


Chart 2 above shows that the pressure in the *Church* and *Private spheres of life* had previously levelled off at an extreme and a very high level respectively. However, in WWL 2021, pressure decreased together with the score in *National life*, reflecting the beginning of local authority training on freedom of religion and belief. It remains to be seen how sustainable this decrease is. The levels of pressure in *Private, Family* and *Community life* show that families of converts continue to prioritize ancestor and spirit worship.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



The score for violence against Christians has been growing steadily over the last 5 WWL reporting periods and is now at a very high level. Churches are being closed and Christians are being attacked and expelled from village communities. However, reporting from Laos remains a challenge. The fact that an increased number of reports were available for WWL 2021, raised the score for violence, but that does not necessarily reflect an actual increase in violence since such incidents may well have occurred but gone unreported in the past.

Gender-specific religious persecution Female

Female Pressure Points
Denied access to social community/networks
Denied communal resources
Discrimination/harassment via education

Forced out of home – expulsion
Imprisonment by government
Violence – physical
Violence – psychological

While Christian men and women tend to suffer equal levels of social ostracism and pressure in Laos, there are areas of [additional vulnerability](#) for Christian women (OECD, “Social Institutions and Gender Index 2019/20: Laos”). Violence against women is culturally widely accepted, including by women. Nearly [three in five women](#) reportedly agree that it is acceptable “if women do not adhere to cultural norms.” Within this context, only one in five women who experience abuse report it to the local authorities (Georgetown, “Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20”, p.45).

Converts face the greatest levels of pressure. Within their local community they face mockery and isolation, which can extend to being denied access to communal resources such as water. Within the domestic sphere, they may be beaten, disowned or put under intense pressure to renounce their faith. Girls may also experience discrimination and harassment at school, although are less likely to be physically beaten compared to boys.

Since Christian men are commonly arrested and detained for their faith, women suffer economically from the loss of the financial provider, 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 if the village chief evicts them from the village. Female Christian leaders have also been arrested.

Pastors in northern areas of Laos have raised concerns about the increasing human trafficking of brides to China. As a country expert summarized: “There is no strong indication yet that Christian women and girls are particular targets, but pastors are bringing this up as growing concern also of the church.”

Gender-specific religious persecution Male

Male Pressure Points
Discrimination/harassment via education
Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Economic harassment via fines

Imprisonment by government
Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
Violence – physical
Violence – psychological

Church leadership in Laos tends to be dominated by men, a role that has become frequently targeted. Pastors are vulnerable to attacks on churches and to incarceration by the authorities. 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 providers in Laos. While detained, leaders report harsh and degrading treatment. As one country expert explained: “The police are known for their brutal treatments on imprisoned people. It's not new that some prisoners even die under police custody.” Exemplifying the risks facing church leaders, one pastor was recently told by his relatives - who worked in the government - that he had been given a ‘black stamp’, meaning that ‘he can be taken and not be found’.

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

Persecution of other religious minorities

Decree 315, implemented by the Laotian government (see “Pressure in Block 4 / *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 mainly either animists or 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 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. It reflects the unbroken power of the country's Communist Party, especially as the economic dependency on China continues to grow. The authorities continue to closely watch and if they see the need, come down very harshly on any perceived dissent and deviation (which includes Christian faith).

Clan oppression:

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 to Christian faith - will not change in the foreseeable future.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: additional vulnerability - <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/LA.pdf>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: three in five women - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on World Watch Research's Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) and on the World Watch Monitor website:

- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Laos>
- <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/Laos>