



Open Doors works with the world's most oppressive countries, strengthening Christians to stand strong in the face of persecution and equipping them to shine Christ's light in these dark places.

The greatest challenge to Christians living under tyranny and oppression is isolation – from God's Word and from the body of Christ. Where other Christian organizations cannot enter or have been forced to flee by oppressive governments or cultures, Open Doors can often be found – supplying Bibles, training Christian leaders, developing Christian communities and ensuring prayer, presence and advocacy for these suffering believers.

When these Christians are strengthened in the Lord, they begin to demonstrate God's forgiveness and reach out in love, even to their oppressors.

ABOUT THE LIST

The World Watch List (WWL) is a ranking of 50 countries where persecution of Christians for religious reasons is worst. First of all, the list covers persecution of Christians of all denominations in the entire country. The focus is on persecution for their faith, not persecution for political, economic, social, ethnic or accidental reasons.

**THE WITNESS OF PERSECUTED
CHRISTIANS HAS A UNIQUE
POWER TO REACH A NEW
GENERATION OF LIVES AND
COMMUNITIES THAT WOULD
OTHERWISE NEVER BE OPEN TO
THE GOSPEL -
BUT THEY CANNOT DO IT ALONE.**



WWL REPORT JANUARY 2012

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14	MAURITANIA	13
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SEVERE PERSECUTION
OPPRESSION
SEVERE LIMITATIONS
SOME LIMITATIONS
SOME PROBLEMS

THE WORLD WATCH
LIST REPRESENTS
THE 50 COUNTRIES
WHERE PERSECUTION
OF CHRISTIANS IS
THE WORST.

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1. NORTH KOREA

Democratic People's Republic of Korea, North Korea tops the World Watch List yet again as the worst country in the world in which to live as a Christian. Defiantly Communist in the Stalinist style, a bizarre quasi-religion was built around the founder of the country, Kim Il Sung. Anyone with "another god" is automatically persecuted, which is why the 200-400,000 Christians in this country must remain deeply underground. If one takes the lower number as the total, then a staggering 25% at least are believed to languish in labor camps for their refusal to worship Kim Il Sung's cult. So thorough is the anti-Christian campaign that even North Koreans born today whose grandparents were Christian are earmarked for low level jobs, which is highly ironic as Kim Il Sung's mother was a Presbyterian deaconess.

The cult of Kim Il Sung has become unsustainable. Visitors to the capital Pyongyang this year saw banners declaring, "The Eternal Father is always with us." In April 2012 the government is promising a celebration of "epic proportions" for the 100th anniversary of Kim Il Sung's birth – a celebration this impoverished nation cannot afford. The UN estimates that roughly half of its 20 plus million inhabitants are malnourished, and famine is stalking the country again, with credible reports of thousands existing on diets of grass and tree bark.

Kim Il Sung died in 1994, and his son and successor Kim Jong Il died suddenly on the 17th of December 2011 of a heart attack at the age of 69. However he had taken steps to ensure his succession, when in the Fall of 2010 his youngest son, Kim Jong Un, in his late twenties, was unveiled and then was made a four star general at the conclave of the Korean Worker's Party in the Spring of 2011. Credible reports suggest this young man is effectively leading the country, and that this is likely to be even worse news for Christians. He has been quoted as saying that he only needs about 30% of the population to survive, and he is believed to have been behind the sending of a hundred extra spies to China to infiltrate Christian networks that seek to help refugees. A South Korean Christian missionary in Dangdong, China, was reportedly assassinated by these spies in August.

North Korea has severe economic woes. Everyone needs some kind of black market trade to survive. For this reason, the regime seeks to court foreign aid and will often indulge in window dressing measures to secure it. As part of this strategy, four churches have been opened in Pyongyang, two are Protestant, one Catholic and one Russian Orthodox., but there is no compelling evidence that they are anything more than sightseeing spots for foreigners. Nevertheless, the North Korean regime is so desperate for aid that various Christian NGO's are allowed to operate in the country. Half the population lives in the northern two-fifths of the country, adjacent to China, where the nation's natural resources, such as coal, oil, tungsten, are concentrated. It is here that family based networks of house churches exist in significant numbers, and many families are allowed to visit China to get food from relatives. This results in a pipeline of support, which is constantly harassed by officials. There were reports of many arrests in the period surveyed, but due to the secrecy that Christians must preserve to protect their activities, it is impossible or unwise to report the true extent of the statistics.



As if it needed saying, conditions did not improve in the reporting period for Christians and North Korea remains the most hostile state in which to practice the Christian faith. Neither are they likely to in 2012 as Kim Jong Un attempts to consolidate power. It is not a foregone conclusion that he will however, though most North Korea watchers believe that the most important regional power—China—will prevent regime collapse. In the ensuing uncertainty, Christianity will remain a deeply underground yet vibrant faith for the foreseeable future.

2. AFGHANISTAN

The total number of points for Afghanistan increased slightly and thus the country overtook Iran this year, taking it from third position to second on the World Watch List 2012. The reason for this shift is a further deterioration of the situation.

Ten years after the Taliban regime was dispelled from the country by international forces, the situation remains desolate, especially for minority groups, including the small Christian community. Despite having signed all international agreements designed to protect the freedom of religion, the government in the current setting is not even able to guarantee the most basic tenants of this right. On the contrary: being recognized as a Christian immediately places any believer in a very difficult position.

All Afghan Christians come from a Muslim background. If it becomes known that someone has converted to Christianity, he or she will face heavy societal and familial pressure. If believers are discovered, they face discrimination by their family and community, as well as local authorities and Muslim clergy. They will be put under pressure to recant their faith. Under such circumstances the tiny Christian minority cannot meet in public. Meetings in private homes are possible, yet require great caution. Consequently, not a single official church building remains, not even for the expatriate believers.

The Afghan government treats converts in a hostile manner and will use every means to bring them back to the Islamic faith. This has been proven again in the reporting period by the examples of two Muslim-background believers (MBBs) who were freed only due to enormous international efforts. Once a Christian is discovered, it is very difficult for him to stay in his homeland.

Open hostility, however, is not confined to the authorities. Although the Taliban was weakened and forced into hiding for a time, the terrorist group is regaining strength. In October they issued a statement via one of their websites vowing to purge all Christians from the country—whether foreign or local. They emphasized targeting foreign relief organizations and non-governmental organizations, accusing them of evangelizing Afghans. The Taliban named about 200 organizations, further stating that they have a plan to target the groups one by one. Christian relief workers continue to be a prime target for all kinds of insurgents. In August 2011, two German development aid workers were kidnapped in the province of Parwan, north of Kabul. Both were shot and their bodies were found on September 5. There were additional reports of kidnappings and other difficulties, which show the tenuous situation of all Christians, expatriates as well as locals.

International forces will continue their withdrawal in the coming years. This could mean an increased Taliban influence in the country, which will negatively impact the rights of minority groups, including Christians. Pressure on believers in Pashtu areas is even more alarming than in other areas of the country.



3. SAUDI ARABIA

PEW Research Forum labels Saudi Arabia as one of the countries with “very high” government restrictions on religion, based on the fact it does not include any provisions for religious freedom in its constitution and basic laws. Saudi Arabia also ranks as “high” in PEW Forum’s Social Hostilities Index, which means the country is part of the 15% of the countries of the world where anti-religious sentiments are very strong in all parts of society.

Religious freedom does not exist in this heartland of Islam where citizens are only allowed to adhere to one religion. No legal protection is provided for freedom of religion, nor does this protection exist in practice. The legal system is based on Islamic law (sharia). Apostasy—conversion to another religion—is punishable by death if the accused does not recant. Although the government recognizes the right of non-Muslims to worship in private, the religious police “the Muttawa” often does not respect this right. The public practice of non-Muslim worship is prohibited as well in Saudi Arabia. Worshipers who engage in such activities risk arrest, imprisonment, lashing, deportation, and sometimes torture. Believers from a Muslim background also run the great risk of honor killing if their family or community discovers their faith.

Most Christians in Saudi Arabia are expatriates who live and work temporarily in the country. The majority of them are from the Philippines. These foreign workers, besides being exploited and poorly paid, are regularly exposed to verbal and physical violence because of their Christian faith. Migrant domestic workers are even threatened with rape unless they convert to Islam. There are a number of converts from Islam who live their faith in deepest secret. However, their number is increasing recently and they are also becoming bolder about their faith. We received reports of several Christians being physically harmed for their faith. The total number of Christians facing this kind of persecution is probably a lot higher, but it is hard to receive sufficient information on this from a closed country like the Wahhabist Kingdom. A number of Christians fled the country because of oppression for faith-related reasons. In some cases their lives are at risk.

Yohan Nese, 31 and Vasantha Sekhar Vara, 28, were arrested on Jan. 21, 2011, for attending a prayer meeting with other Indian nationals and accused of converting Muslims to Christianity. Religious police interrogated and beat them and they were kept in horrible conditions in prison. On May 30, Vasantha was released and on July 12, Yohan was released. Both returned to India. On February 12, a foreign worker was arrested in Jeddah after discussing faith issues with Muslims close to a mosque. At first he faced the death penalty, but it was ultimately decided to deport him to his home country. Because of these arrests, the points for Saudi Arabia increased somewhat compared to the previous WWL reporting period (64.5 last year versus 67.5 this year) when we did not receive any reports of arrests of Christians. This brings Saudi Arabia from position four to position three in the current WWL.

“The rule of the Al Saud family will face a number of challenges in 2012-16, including a potentially fractious succession process and wider demands for political reform. Despite the holding of the country’s second municipal elections on September 29, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) does not expect any democratic reform or any move to an elected parliament before 2016,” states an EIU brief. If the political situation does not change, the situation for Christians is not expected to improve, as the country seems to be heading for some more years of regime continuity. As the number of Christian converts from Islam is increasing, along with their boldness in sharing their new faith, Christians face the risk of more persecution and oppression in Saudi Arabia in the near future.

4. SOMALIA

Somalia went from position 5 to 4 in the WWL 2012. The overall persecution situation in Somalia tightened a bit more in the country. The main persecution engine is Islamic extremism.

Talking about restrictions on the Church does not make much sense in Somalia. Somalia does not have a traditional church. No one is expected to be a Christian in Somalia, so Muslim-background believers (MBBs) do not have organized church groups. They exist as individual secret believers, and can only know a few others to make a small secret group. The largest known group in Somalia is composed of five believers. It is extremely difficult to live as secret believers in a country like Somalia because of the atmosphere of terror and fear around being a Christian. For parents, living as secret believers is even more difficult: it is dangerous to raise their children as Christians for fear of being discovered and executed.

Somalia is a difficult "country" to assess. Somalia comprises several distinct areas (though some of the borders are disputed). In Somaliland, which does not host the Islamic extremist group al-Shabaab, one can speak about a stern Islamic regime where social groups (including family) and government encourage each other to minimize space for Christians, especially MBBs. Puntland compares to Somaliland. The difference with Somaliland, however, is that due to the lawlessness in Puntland, this area is the safe haven of pirates and also al-Shabaab. In those parts of the south controlled by al-Shabaab, the situation appears even worse - MBBs who are discovered are at serious risk of "honor killings." Al-Shabaab is enforcing a harsh interpretation of sharia in the territories it controls. This militia was strongly radicalized through external influence of al-Qaeda in recent years. Because of that its support among the local population is waning. One may suspect that the image of al-Shabaab has not improved during the recent drought crisis in the country, when the militia obstructed humanitarian aid from the West. At the same time however al-Shabaab is effectively trying to wipe out Christianity from the parts of the country it controls.



Numerous people have fled within the country and outside the country for food, ethnic and political reasons as well as for their faith. In such situations the vulnerability of Christians (and adherents of other minority religions) to armed groups, local leaders and individuals is enormous. The impact of this "horrific scenario" on Christians can only be imagined but is not sufficiently covered in this WWL summary.

The Constitution, approved by the President in 1979, provided for religious freedom. However, after the subsequent wars, Somalia now has a Transitional Federal Government (TFG). The TFG is the "Islamic Courts Union" (ICU) reincarnated, with an extremist interpretation of Islamic law. The stronger the policies of the TFG against Christians, the more acceptable it has been to the Muslim extremists. On the other hand, the very strict application of Islamic law is tempered because TFG needs the international community in order to stay in power.

The TFG has not allowed Christians to openly practice their beliefs in Somalia, and if anyone is a Christian, his (or her) rights of religion will not be guaranteed. Still the impression is that TFG, the official government itself, is not very active against believers - it has other issues to deal with. This is but little consolation because the TFG is locked up in the capital, and armed groups and local leaders have a free hand. Until August 2011 the TFG controlled only 10% of Mogadishu, the capital, but the international forces have managed to capture over 95% of the city. The Kenyan Defence Forces' incursion in Somalia has seen the territory under al-Shabaab significantly reduced.

Al-Shabaab has been weakened by a series of events, compounded by the deaths of its leaders Osama bin Laden and Faizul Muhammad, the withdrawal of support from Eritrea, the apathy of Somalia, and the shift of political aspirations of Somali people. However al-Shabaab still remains a regional threat because of the many foreigners it is recruiting from Kenya, Uganda, Pakistan and other countries.

Open Doors does not expect a significant change for good in the persecution situation in Somalia, neither in the short nor in the medium term. Chaos normally creates more chaos; Christians as adherents of a minority religion are normally extra vulnerable in those circumstances. However we expect that if the Transitional Federal Government forces backed by the international forces continue to take control and keep al-Shabaab at bay, the persecution may decrease a little.

5. IRAN

Religious persecution of certain minorities has intensified in Iran since 2005. This is particularly aimed at the Baha'i, at Sufi Muslims and at Christians, especially MBBs. According to the state, only Armenians and Assyrians can be Christian - ethnic Persians are by definition Muslim, and therefore ethnic Persian Christians are by definition apostates. This makes almost all Christian activity illegal, especially when it occurs in Persian languages - from evangelism to Bible training to publishing Scripture and Christian books. Yet the regime's harsh treatment of Christians only further fuels the flames of church growth.

Islam is the official religion in Iran, and all laws and regulations must be consistent with the official interpretation of sharia law. Although ethnic (Armenian and Assyrian) Christians are a recognized religious minority who officially are guaranteed religious freedom, they have reported imprisonment, physical abuse, harassment and discrimination because of their faith. Armenian and Assyrian churches are allowed to teach fellow countrymen in their own language, but it is forbidden to minister to people with a Muslim background (speaking Farsi). Under the judicial interpretations of sharia law, any Muslim who leaves Islam to embrace another religion faces the death penalty. Many church services are being monitored by the secret police. Believers, especially converts from Islam, who are active in churches or the cell group movement are being pressured: they are questioned, arrested and put in jail and beaten. Individual believers are being oppressed by society, under pressure of the authorities, and family.



During the last few months of 2010 and the beginning of 2011, mass arrests of Christians took place; more than 200 Christians were arrested during the reporting period. This number is comparable to the number of Christians arrested during the previous World Watch List reporting period. The remarkable difference this time is the statements against Christianity in Iran which religious and political leaders made in the media preceding the arrests. For the first time ever, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has warned of the ever expanding influence and numbers of home-based churches during a speech on October 19th. Iran's supreme religious leader blamed "the enemies of Islam for establishing and encouraging the expansion of Christianity in Iran." Also in October, Iran's intelligence minister said that his agents had discovered hundreds of underground church groups, including 200 in the Muslim holy city of Mashhad. In January the provincial governor of Tehran, Moreza Tamadon, said in a reaction to the arrests of Christians that more will follow in the near future. He especially criticized Christian evangelicalism, calling it a "corrupt and deviant movement", "a cultural invasion of the enemy" and likened the Protestant movement to the Taliban and the Wahabis in Islam. More recently, the Minister of Intelligence, Heydar Moslehi, has reportedly warned of the threat of house churches and other Christian interests during October and November 2011. He also indicated that new efforts are being made to battle against the growth of the house church movement in Iran. Since the start of the anti-Christian rhetoric, the number arrests of Christians have increased. Although most Christians were later released, pressure on the church remains high.

The regime lost credibility following the turmoil after the 2009 elections, and in an effort to distract attention from internal problems, it is increasingly lashing out against Christians. Several Christians were sentenced to jail or death for Christian activities. However there were no reports of the implementation of death penalties. Also, Open Doors did not receive any reports of Christians being killed for their faith whereas this was the case during the last reporting period. Therefore there is a slight decrease in total of points for Iran (from 67.5 last year to 66 points this year). At the same time the points for other countries in the top ten increased and as a result Iran went down a few positions from number two to five. Nevertheless, the situation of religious freedom for Christians has not improved; it is as serious as last year and no improvement is expected on the short run.

The Iranian authorities' fear of the increase of Christianity in the country is based on facts and not just paranoia. Curiosity and interest in Christianity (and in other non-Islamic religions) is growing strongly among Iranian Muslims who are disillusioned with Iran's state-sponsored Shi'ism, as a result of what the Iranian government has done in the name of Islam. In total, there are now 460,000 Christians (from an Islamic and Assyrian/Armenian background) in Iran.

6. MALDIVES

The Maldives are well-known as a dream destination for holidays. The islands are located in the midst of the Indian Ocean, surrounded by blue water and white beaches stretched out under the blazing sun. This is the picture authorities want to give to the outside world. The harsh attitude the government takes towards all Christian believers is less known, darkening the lovely picture of the country considerably. Nothing substantial has changed during the last reporting period, resulting in no changes in ranking or points for the Maldives on the 2012 World Watch List.

As every Maldivian citizen has to be Muslim, all deviant religious convictions are strictly forbidden. The government does not distinguish between national and expat believers. The tiny number of indigenous believers is not able to meet publicly, let alone worship together. On the contrary, they have to practice their faith in utmost secrecy, always in fear of being discovered. While the authorities closely monitor all religious activities that they perceive to be suspicious, social control also remains extremely high. Maldivian citizens agree with the heavy handed authorities because they see freedom of religion as freedom to discuss religious issues related to Islam. This freedom was non-existent under the former regime governing the country. Maldivian society demonstrates this attitude towards all kinds of beliefs or convictions, be it Christianity or Atheism. Additionally, the government has increased control of all media.

According to an amendment made to the "Protection of Religious Unity Act" in September 2011, every person must avoid creating hatred towards people of other religions. While this may initially sound good, it effectively reinforces the existing government policy that Islam is an inseparable part of a Maldivian's cultural identity. The legislation, forbidding the practice of any religion except Islam, is thus confirmed once again. Commentators therefore stated that the official direction religion is taking in the country will be toward Deoband Islam, the same ideology which informs the Taliban's convictions.

The Maldivian government views itself as the protector and defender of Islam. This was recently demonstrated by the imprisonment of a foreign Christian teacher, who was detained and deported from the country after allegations that he had stored Christian material on a school computer. Although no converts were killed for their faith in the past year, pressure on them remains very high.

Given the sternness of the government and the support it enjoys by Maldivian citizens, it cannot be expected that there will be substantial changes in the years to come. Maldivian authorities capitalize on the remoteness of the Islands to keep a powerful grip on all perceived religious deviations.

7. UZBEKISTAN

For the seventh consecutive year Uzbekistan remains the highest ranked country on the WWL of all Central Asian states. The total number of points has risen considerably compared to last year. The regime is fighting several Islamic movements, but seems foremost to be pre-occupied by the thought of staying in power.

For Christians in the region's most populous country, practicing their faith has become difficult, though the Russian Orthodox Church seem to be less affected. All activities of unregistered churches are strictly forbidden both inside and outside the churches. Youth activities are forbidden, outreaches are forbidden, seminars and training are forbidden. Private Bible studies are being tolerated, but those meetings are always in danger of being closed down. The strict monitoring of all Christian activities continues and has even been intensified. Though it is fair to say that registered churches have a somewhat better standing, they nonetheless also have suffered an increasing number of raids, church members were fined and underwent harassment by the authorities. Youth activities are especially targeted with officials intimidating young believers, often instilling in them a fear of taking part in church meetings. Additionally, when brought to court, a fair treatment is no more than a far dream for anyone, including Christians.

One of the main reasons for raiding churches is the confiscation of literature. The authorities will take any kind of Christian literature such as Bibles, hymn books or commentaries along with DVDs and computers with them. Because of this, entire libraries of churches, collected under extremely difficult circumstances, are taken away, leaving the churches and their leaders with almost nothing. Neither importing Christian books and literature nor printing them within the country is legally possible. As the state also controls the media and blocks websites with religious content, it is difficult for believers to obtain Bibles and other materials in any form. During the last ten years, only a single church was granted registration.

The government policy of not just fining Christians, but also giving them short term prison sentences of 3 to 15 days, continues. The number of Christians undergoing such treatment has increased considerably. The raids and threats are not limited to a certain area of the country, but are reported from the capital Tashkent as well as rural areas, from Western Karakalpakstan to the Eastern Ferghana Valley. And it is not only the government which is hostile towards the Christian minority.

Societal pressure on believers (especially MBBs) is extreme. Other religious groups and so-called Mahalla committees are constantly observing the believers and reporting on them. Neighborhood, family and Islamic clergy are the main sources of harassment. In several cases, MBBs have lost their jobs, once their faith became known to the public. In TV programs and talk shows, but also in newspapers and radio programs, believers are frequently portrayed in a very negative way. In some cases, as Christians were exposed on TV, the audience was warned of them, thus causing employers to fire their Christian employees. This way several families have lost their source of income.

The outlook for the Uzbek Christians is not bright. Authorities have started to tighten their grip on all churches. Societal hostility against them is growing, fanned by negative TV reports. At the same time, teaching their believers is an increased challenge for local pastors.



8. YEMEN

In Yemen, Islam is the state religion and sharia is the source of all legislation. There is some religious freedom for foreigners, but evangelism is prohibited; several expatriate workers were deported in the past for Christian activities. Yemenis who leave Islam may face the death penalty as a result. Christians from a Muslim background do not only face persecution from the authorities but also from family and extremist Islamic groups who threaten “apostates” with death if they do not revert to Islam. Insecurity caused by terrorist movements makes Yemen very unstable; a situation which has even further deteriorated during the “Arab Spring” riots of 2011. Kidnappings of foreigners in Yemen have occurred regularly, usually ending by meeting kidnapper’s demands for some community assistance, funds, or release of clan members from custody. Four of the nine foreign Christians kidnapped in June 2009 remain missing.

In Aden there are four official churches (three Catholic and one Anglican) for the several thousands of expat Christians (most are Westerners, South and East Asians and Arabs) or refugees (mainly Ethiopian) living in the country. However, in the north, no church buildings are allowed. Large numbers of expats have left as a result of the “Arab Spring” riots. The number of Muslim background believers is estimated at just a few hundred. When a Muslim becomes a Christian, he or she faces persecution from family and government. They are not allowed to have their own gatherings, so they meet in secret locations. Due to the chaotic and violent situation in the country, there was limited access to the country and less information was available (also expressed in the Variation Degree which increased from 3 last year to 5 this year. The number of points for Yemen decreased slightly, from 60 to 58.5 points.) Because of this, the country is ranked in 8th place this year (instead of 7 last year).

The government has used excessive force to crack down on the protestors after 10 months of mass protest, caused by high levels of unemployment in the country and government corruption. President Saleh finally signed a political transition agreement on November 23, transferring power to his deputy Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. In February 2012, presidential elections will be organized.

However, as the International Crisis Group notes, “Ten months of popular protest spiked by periodic outbursts of violence have done little to clarify Yemen’s political future.” Yemeni politics are indeed extremely complex. The country is deeply divided between pro- and anti-Saleh forces and the south of the country is claiming its independence. In spite of President Saleh’s resignation, the conflict risks getting bloodier, opposing Shiite Huthi rebels and Sunni Islamists. To make it even more complex, the country has a strong tribal system which is difficult to understand for outsiders. Besides that, small groups of al-Qaeda-linked groups struggle for more power in the country. Christians who are on either side of the political spectrum, in spite of their differences, are reported to have maintained unity in Christ.



9. IRAQ

A true exodus of Christians is going on in Iraq. Christians are fleeing the country massively and it can only be guessed how many are still present. Since the United States army has started to withdraw from the country, Iraq has suffered from structural uncertainty, conflict and instability, under a government incapable of enforcing the rule of law and providing a minimum of security. Corruption levels are soaring and sectarian violence does not seem to stop.

Iraq's Federal Constitution says each individual has freedom of thought, conscience and belief, but there is no article on changing one's religion. However sharia is the primary source of law, which forbids conversion of Muslims to other religions. This makes it legally impossible to apply freedom of belief in the cases of converts. There is no safe haven for Arab families who convert from Islam.

Iraqi Christians feel that the current government fails to give them security. There was a marked increase of killings of Christians and attacks on churches during the previous reporting period. Violence still is part of the Iraqi society in 2011, although there were fewer reports of casualties than last year. During the current reporting period, we reported 38 Christians killed and between 48-99 injured, numbers which are likely to be higher in reality. Although these figures are dramatic, those of the previous reporting period were even higher: at least 90 murdered and 230 injured (which is mostly explained by the deadly bomb attack on the church in Baghdad in October 2010 and the attack on the busses full of Christian students in May 2010). Also the number of reported abductions decreased whereas they still take place regularly. *(These decreased numbers resulted in just 1.5 points less for Iraq: from 58.5 last year to 57 this year, leading to position 9 on this year's WWL versus 8 last year).* It goes without saying that the situation of Christians in Iraq is still deplorable and is by no means improving.



A new development is the deterioration of the situation of Christians in the northern part of the country, Kurdistan. Whereas Kurdistan has long been considered a safe haven for Christians, violence against Christians is on the increase there as well. The main cause of persecution there is Islamic extremism. Analysts think that one of the reasons for the growing Islamic extremism is Iraq's drift into Iran's orbit while the United State's influence is diminishing in the country.

Christian individuals are still being threatened, robbed, raped, or kidnapped and churches attacked. In April, a roadside bomb exploded near the rear entrance of a Catholic church in Baghdad after Sunday Easter Mass, injuring at least seven people (not necessarily all Christians) and shattering its windows. Two churches in Kirkuk were bombed in August 2011 and damaged badly. Several people were injured. Bombs were found in two other churches in this city. One month before, a new church was opened in Kirkuk. The attacks could have been a reaction to that, which may have been incited by the fact that it was Ramadan.

The sectarian violence is causing Christians to flee the country in large numbers; tens of thousands of Christians have left the country since the

attack on the Sacred Heart church in Baghdad at the end of October 2010. Many sources reported that in 1991 Christians in Iraq numbered around 850,000 – 1,000,000, including those living in the Kurdish region. In 2003 the number dropped to 550,000 and in early 2010 there were 345,000. The estimated number of Christians continues to decrease, leaving an estimated 300,000 Christians in Iraq at present. The figures show a dramatic decrease of Christians in 10 years. As a result of the rise of Al Qaeda and the advance of Islamist movements, the largest non-Muslim religious group in the country is at risk of disappearing after a presence of two millennia. Also, the exodus of Christians in Iraq may well have important political and social consequences for the region.

The Economist Intelligence Unit expects that *“the government of national unity, which brings together the four largest political groups, will continue to be weak and divided, and some blocs are likely to pull out to join the parliamentary opposition.”* The weakness of the state is expected to benefit insurgent groups who are expanding their power base, which will make the situation of Christians even more difficult. This also affects the Kurdish region which was once safe for Christians. The attacks on Christian-owned businesses and some mainly Christian villages in Northern Iraq from December 2 to 5, 2011 by Islamic rioters show the future is bleak for Christians in the entire country of Iraq.

10. PAKISTAN

Pakistan provided one of persecution's worst headlines in 2011 with the assassination of Cabinet Minister Shahbaz Bhatti, the highest ranking Christian ever to be killed in this lawless country. A Roman Catholic, the forty-two-year old was the Minister for Minority Affairs in the federal government and one of the highest profile advocates for the removal of the notorious blasphemy law. As the only Christian minister in the cabinet, he was unusually influential. Four gunmen approached him in broad daylight in Islamabad when he was returning in his car from a visit to his mother on March 2. They sprayed his car with bullets and fled the scene, and have not been heard of since. The investigation – like so many in Pakistan – has been described as “tepid” by human rights activists. A letter found at the scene from the Pakistani Taliban said that he had been executed for his attempts to amend the blasphemy law: “We will not spare anybody involved in acts of blasphemy,” it read.

Pakistan's Christians are a beleaguered minority of about 2.5% in a country of 176.7 million, which is 96% Muslim, and the killing of Bhatti was “one of the most demoralizing acts for us of recent years,” according to a church leader in Karachi. Bhatti's death came after the slaying of the Punjab Governor Salman Taseer, a Muslim sympathetic to the Christian plight. He set out to change the blasphemy law by supporting Asia Noreen (also known as Asia Bibi), the first woman sentenced to death on blasphemy charges. One of his bodyguards turned his gun on the Governor, while five others of the security detail merely watched. Thousands of militants turned out in the streets to support the assassin and protest that he even be charged with murder. The central government, with characteristic weakness, quickly stalled any move to deal with the offending laws. Indeed, Bhatti's cabinet post was abolished, and the position downgraded to the state governmental level.

Four other Christians were also killed in the reporting period, two of them gunned down outside their church in Hyderabad, Sindh Province on March 22. Death threats are routine for church leaders; beatings are common and damage to church property occurs on a monthly basis.

Pakistan's Christians are caught between Islamic militant organizations that routinely target Christians for violence, and an Islamizing culture that makes Christians feel less and less a part of Pakistan. Add into the mix a weak and corrupt central government unwilling to confront injustice, and a military that has been found complicit in fueling Islamic militants to gain leverage in Afghanistan and Indian-held Kashmir, and it is clear that Christians have few allies in their fight to flourish in the land of their birth. These persecution dynamics have been in place for many years however, and the country is set to surpass Indonesia as containing the world's largest Muslim population by 2030 (256 million), according to a Pew Research Report released in January 2011.

The news is not all bad however. The laws of Pakistan give Christians considerable freedom to run their churches; the Christian population is growing, and a steady but significant trickle of Muslims join churches. In the future, the rising superpower of China may force the military to stamp out internal Muslim militants as it intends to build a trade superhighway through the country down to Sindh province where they are building a warm water port. The USA also retains leverage over the state due to its US\$2 billion annual grant to the military. But in the shorter term it is becoming harder to be a Christian in Pakistan.

11. ERITREA

Eritrea climbed from position 12 to position 11 in the WWL 2012. The slight increase of the persecution situation in the country is mainly due to a higher number of incidents involving the small group of independent Protestant evangelical Christians, declared enemies of the State by the government of President Isaias Afewerki. In Eritrea the non-compliant churches are understood to be evangelical, Pentecostal or charismatic. Jehovah Witnesses, however, also bear the yoke of aggressive persecution. Main characteristic of the persecution situation: very serious persecution of a small part of the Christian body in the country, with the potential to see the broader body affected in the near future.

The government is the main persecutor. The government of Eritrea adheres somehow to Marxist ideology but its real quest seems to be plain power. The general population has become tired of the government and does not expose evangelical Christians to the government like it did before.

The persecution pattern in Eritrea is therefore mostly related to the specific dynamics of government driven persecution. No spontaneous killings-on-the-spot by individuals or mobs, inspired by their overzealous religious leaders, but more systematic government action. Christians from the evangelical minority are pressurized to change or renounce their religion. They are tortured and forced to revert to the registered denominations. While no Christian has been killed in the last year, five Christians died in prison due to illness. Many more believers were released so that they wouldn't die while in government's custody. Some were denied medical attention, others received inadequate medical care. Anyone who is caught or discovered to be an evangelical Christian was sent to jail without trial, the crime committed being an evangelical Christian in Eritrea. It is hard to establish exactly how many Christians are in jail because of the nature of crackdown that the government undertakes all over the country. Actual estimations are around 1,500 Christians in detention. The government holds Christians in military camps, some in hidden places not accessible to ordinary people other than government officers. The persecuted only emerge to narrate their story after they have been released.

Churches that existed in 1952 are favored, including the Eritrean Orthodox church, Roman Catholic Church and Lutheran church. Islam is among the recognized religious groups since 1952. The Eritrean Orthodox Church is the largest church in the country, most aligned to the government and government policies. Its members are said to spy on the activities of evangelical Christians and report them to the government. But if they start to annoy government, they get in trouble, too. So, they are closer to the government, but not free.

In the past, when the churches were closed on May 12, 2002, most believers had fled the country. The majority of the believers now are those who have come to Christ during this latest period of crackdown. The Church is growing in size and strength. Meanwhile persecution is increasing. Since June 20, 2011 the believers in prison have been denied visits and supplies by relatives. The past year saw a renewed crackdown on house churches resulting in imprisonment of at least 23 youths. A new persecution dimension opened occurred when the government required the Orthodox and Catholic priests in training, normally exempt from military service, to be enrolled for military service. The churches refused but the youths were forcefully drafted into the army.

Despite the heavy crackdown and persecution of evangelical Christians, the government is disappointed that it hasn't been able to wipe out the evangelical churches completely. There are recent revelations by Wikileaks, that the government has plans to exterminate the leadership of the evangelical churches.

Open Doors expects that the overall persecution situation in the coming years will remain the same. If the government also starts to seriously persecute the broader Christian community, or the actions of the government against the evangelical churches will be too severe, social groups may in the medium term start to resist government actions and contribute to softening of the persecution situation.

12. LAOS

The fact that Laos has dropped out of the top 10 on World Watch List 2012 should not be seen as a sign of improvement in this country. In fact, nothing has changed substantially over the past year. The state is Communist-atheist and authorities exercise tight control on all parts of society. This is also true for all religious activities. Only three Christian denominations are registered (Catholic Church, Laos Evangelical Church and Seventh-day Adventist). Other small independent Protestant congregations are under pressure and have been refused recognition. The activities of unrecognized churches are considered illegal by authorities, who detain and arrest their members and leaders under various pretexts.

The preferred religion of the Lao government is Theravada Buddhism. The Christian minority is therefore perceived antagonistically as being “foreign agents.” But the real problem seems to lie within the conduct of the local authorities, who regard Christians as enemies. Believers must take extreme caution when talking about their faith. Christians always have to stay within tacitly understood guidelines. Local authorities often make use of the prevalent hostile attitude of society towards Christians as a means and justification to monitor them. Frequently, Buddhist leaders and village shamans closely watch Christians. Despite such pressure from all sides, the Church is growing, especially among tribal groups.

Hence, believers with a tribal background—which includes the vast majority of all Christian believers—are suffering the most. Occasionally some Christians are arrested, detained and pressured to renounce their faith. This is especially true among Christians from the Katin or Hmong tribes who are sometimes even killed, often in Army clashes. In April during this reporting period, the lives of at least four Hmong Christians were taken and several others were arrested. Churches were deprived of their buildings and possessions, which were often destroyed and sometimes confiscated. On the other hand, an encouraging sign was that the government afforded some expelled families with their own piece of land on which they can farm, allowed the children to attend regular school and welcomed believers in public hospitals.

But in general, for several years, nothing substantial in Laos has changed for the Christian minority. And at the moment, it looks like this will also be true for the coming year.



13. NORTHERN NIGERIA

The main persecution engine in Northern Nigeria is Islamic extremism. Northern Nigeria went up in the World Watch List from position 23 to 13 with an estimated total of 1,000 deaths, mostly in the North. More than reflecting an increase in the number of incidental attacks against Christians and churches, this change highlights the structural process in which social groups firmly linked to a dominating religion (Islam) and government drive each other into a “vicious circle” of suffocating religious minorities (Christians) in the sharia dominated areas of Northern Nigeria.

Persecution of Christians in Northern Nigeria is driven by extremist Islam. Boko Haram is the most well-known face of the persecution. The Boko Haram sect—“Western education is forbidden”—was founded in 2001 and flourished until 2009 when it was forbidden by the authorities and suffered a serious blast from security forces. However, between then and now the sect has been able to reorganize and be a serious threat, attacking not only Christians and their churches, but also government buildings, police stations and even mosques that do not follow their agenda. For instance, on June 12, 2011, the sect members detonated bombs in Maiduguri killing about 14 people including a pastor and his secretary who were shot dead at the church premises. Church leaders in Maiduguri are disturbed over the negligence of the government to bring an end to the activities of the sect; from 2009 to date over 50 churches have been destroyed by the sect members and around 10 pastors have been killed. Also, many believers have been murdered. Boko Haram, a homegrown fundamentalist group devoted to violence which allied itself with al-Qaida in the Magreb (AQIM), also claimed responsibility for the August 26 bombing in Nigeria's capital of Abuja. The car-bomb blast killed at least 19 people and wounded many more, but more important than the numbers was the target—the United Nations headquarters—this way internationalizing the conflict in Northern Nigeria.

Another face of extremist Islam in Northern Nigeria is broad popular support for radical Muslim expression, as shown by the many dramatic events in which churches were attacked and families killed or wounded.

The close interconnectedness of radical Muslim activists poses specific difficulties to Christians in Northern Nigeria. On August 29, Christian youth heavily provoked by Muslim youth—and weary of having seen their family members killed for such a long time without anyone intervening—forcefully retaliated causing the loss of three lives. The Nigerian dailies reported that more than 12 Muslims were killed, and a bigger group of Christians injured—the Christian youths had been shot by either the Muslims or security agents. After this event, threatening statements against Christians in Jos were flowing in from neighboring Muslim states, targeting minority Christians in all 12 sharia states in Northern Nigeria. Sometimes it seems extremist Muslims everywhere in the region are eagerly waiting for an incident to “blow the trumpet of an attack” that outweighs by far the initial event.

In April 2011, incumbent Goodluck E. Jonathan of the ruling People's Democratic Party, a Christian, won the presidential elections in Nigeria. There was a big debate about the candidacy of Jonathan, because he was a Christian. Muslims felt the presidential candidates should have been Muslims, based on an agreement in Nigerian politics between Muslims and Christians. The victory of Jonathan caused



serious unrest, leaving hundreds killed and a massive destruction of churches from Yobe state in the North East to Sokoto in the Northwest.

The combination of terrorist group activities and broad popular support at the local level for further Islamization of Northern Nigeria, including the possible quest to eliminate Christian presence in the (intended) “House of Islam,” makes the future for the church in this part of the country very difficult. In the “middle belt” between the mainly Muslim north and Christian south, the risk of civil war is very real. A complicating factor is that in this region dozens of ethnic groups vie for control of fertile lands and political and economic power. While much of the conflict over the past decade cuts across religious and ethnic lines, it finds its roots in simmering economic and political issues, and rapid population growth. The effect of the developments in Northern Nigeria and the “middle belt” in Southern Nigeria, remains to be seen.

Northern Nigeria has an estimated 27,000,000 Christians with a total population of about 70,000,000. According to one of Open Doors’ sources, “about 5 million believers are under intense pressure in sharia states of the North as a result of their faith. Because of the intense solidarity sentiments and structures among Muslims and sharia states—in a tense socio-economic situation—Open Doors expects the persecution situation in Northern Nigeria will deteriorate, also drawing Christians living in quieter areas in the North who are not yet exposed to severe persecution, into the vicious circle of religious violence that took more than a thousand lives during the reporting period.

14. MAURITANIA

Mauritania is not often in the news and seems to have been forgotten by the international community. Very little attention has been given to the suffering of its small, local Church. Because of harsh government restrictions, it is very difficult, if not impossible, for Christian missions and Christians in general to operate in the country. After Somalia and Eritrea, Mauritania is the African country that ranks highest on Open Doors' World Watch List. Mauritania also ranks as "high" on the PEW Forum's Government Restrictions Index, meaning that religious beliefs and practices are strongly restricted by government laws, policies and actions.

Mauritania, very proud to be officially a pure Muslim country, does not include any provisions for religious freedom in its constitution, and its laws prohibit conversion to Christian faith. The sentence for apostasy is death.

Recent incidents of persecution include several deaths. In 2009, a U.S. schoolteacher in Mauritania, Chris Leggett, was murdered by Islamic extremists for spreading Christianity. A young woman, a Christian convert from Islam, died in May 2010 after she was beaten by her father and brothers because she refused to come back to the Muslim faith. In 2011 the overall situation of the country has not noticeably improved. According to our reports this year, some of the local Christians were beaten, but nobody was killed for their faith. However, pressures upon Christians did get stronger compared to last year.

In Mauritania, it is extremely difficult to be a Christian. Pressure on Muslim Background Believers from family and tribe members and leaders of local mosques, is very high. There is some freedom for expat churches, but even for expats residing in the country it is complicated. It remains completely impossible for Mauritanian Christians to register their churches, so they must meet in secret.

There is no question that extremist Islam is the main factor of increasing persecution in the country. Extremist Islamic ideology has become more visible in Mauritania during this last year, showing that the Salafists are having a growing influence in their attempts to adhere to the rules of Islamic morality, notes Magharebia, a U.S.-sponsored online news website, in a recent country brief.

The Islamists create tension and opposition against Christians. In December 2010, at the National Assembly, Islamist Members of Parliament questioned the government about their attitude toward Christian organizations, which led to increased monitoring of Christian activities. In July 2011, the council of the Mauritanian Imams asked the government to criminalize obvious apostasy and proselytizing.

Moreover, the influence of al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) in Mauritania is growing. The group is gaining support among local Mauritians and is also monitoring Christians in the country. Northern areas of the country are increasingly under the control of extremist Muslim groups who are mostly linked to the al-Qaeda network.

Compared to last year, the situation in the country is getting worse, but not dramatically worse. On the WWL, the country dropped one place because other countries climbed, yet it increased in points to indicate a slight increase in persecution.

The country, isolated from the rest of the world because of its mainly desert landscape and rule by a very oppressive regime, has not yet experienced anything related to the Arab Spring that has brought about the big social and political shifts in neighboring countries. However, extremist Islam is becoming more influential and this will likely lead to the increased oppression of Christians.



15. EGYPT

Egypt is home to nearly 10 million Christians, about three quarters of all Christians in the Middle-East. Tensions between this large Christian minority and the Muslim majority have always existed, but seem to have increased over recent months. The revolution that ousted President Hosni Mubarak, who stepped down February 11, 2011, brought Muslims and Christians together against a hated dictator as they demanded an end to corruption and a solution to structural poverty and rising unemployment. However, Muslim-Christian relations deteriorated afterwards.

Egyptian Christians, initially enjoying their new-found freedom, were hopeful that their situation might improve. However, as the Islamists succeeded in the events following the constitutional referendum, the government was unable to restore necessary law and order. Increasing levels of violence against Christians seem to indicate that the situation for Christians has actually worsened. This explains why Egypt jumps from position 19 on the WWL in 2011 to position 15.

Radical Islamic fundamentalists are becoming highly visible. The Muslim Brotherhood, the jihadist Gamaa Islamiyya and the Salafist Ansar al-Sunna Society are manifesting themselves in the public domain. After decades of suppression, these groups are ready to form political parties, compete in coming elections and determine future developments in the country.

Egypt made headlines with the October Maspero massacre that killed 26 Coptic Christians who were peaceful protesters; hundreds were injured. In this bloody incident, the military did not do anything to protect Christians who were being attacked and even participated in the killings. This massacre can hardly be seen as an isolated incident, but is part of an overall negative trend that started with the 2011 New Years Eve bomb attack in front of the Alexandria Church of the Two Saints that killed and injured many Christians.

Persecution of Christians in Egypt is on the rise, with a substantial increase in numbers killed, physically harmed and churches/houses attacked. Salafi Muslims continue to intimidate local Christians by blocking entrances to churches, demanding that church buildings be moved outside communities, or that church repairs be forbidden. There are accounts of an increasing number of Coptic girls abducted and forced into Islamic marriages since the January 25 revolution. In rural areas, Copts are constantly terrorized, with security forces turning a blind eye to the events.

During Mubarak's government, oppression of churches was always present. The country is now led by a civilian transition government supervised by the Supreme Military Council, which is showing an increasingly anti-Christian attitude and is sympathetic towards the Muslim Brotherhood. This military council will seek to retain control of the government, even after the parliamentary elections, as it has done for the last 50 years.

In the context of Salafi manifestations in public, the future looks bleak for Christians and for moderate Muslims. If civil and political rights are obtained, Christians could substantially improve their position, but this scenario does not seem very likely in Egypt where the poorly educated population is rapidly turning to Islam. Support for both the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi Islam is growing. After radical Muslims won the parliamentary elections on November 25, the situation for Christians will almost certainly get worse.

16. SUDAN

The main persecution engine in Sudan is Islamic extremism. Sudan (North Sudan before the independence of South Sudan on July 9, 2011) jumped from position 35 to 16 in the World Watch List. Although there are some structural developments that push for further persecution, this jump mainly reflects a higher number of incidents involving Christians and churches. The number of formally reported killings is limited, but the whole Abyei, South Kordofan and Blue Nile area has seen thousands killed, religion being one factor but hopelessly confused with perceived political loyalties and control of resources. Still we count those victims as killings related to persecution of Christians because their faith highlighted them as potential targets, while their vulnerability is high in a context in which government and society severely restricts religious freedom.

Do the constitution and/or other national laws of this country provide for freedom of religion? President Omar al-Bashir asserted last year that after the July 9 separation from South Sudan, (North) Sudan would be based on sharia (Islamic law) and Islamic culture, with Arabic as the official language. That is not official yet although it is unofficially implemented. An expert calls "Islamization and Arabization rampant in parts of the country." At the same time, mainstream Muslim society supports the President's assertion by claiming amendments to the Constitution to make it overtly more Islamic. One would think this to be superfluous, the more so because practice already shifted towards Islamic law. Anyhow, it seems Islamic social groups and government pair spontaneously in pushing for a stern Islamic society.

Persecution comes from different sources: (a) Islamic groups, and the broader public, wanting to form an Islamic state; (b) the family against Muslim Background Believers (MBBs); (c) the State against recognized Christians. Actually conversion is just not recognized, i.e. MBBs are treated as if they are Muslims.

Is Christianity growing or decreasing? Many Christian Background Believers left (North) Sudan for South Sudan. The number of MBBs in Sudan is probably rising.

In Sudan, persecution of Christians has increased rapidly over the past 12 months. An expert states "it should have increased more rapidly, but because of war in South Kordofan and Blue Nile, it slowed down in the capital in order to gain public opinion." In the near future, persecution of Christians in Sudan will likely increase seriously, with Christians in the country being squeezed between Islamization and Arabization. The effects of a possible war between Sudan and the newly formed South Sudan will even be more disastrous for Christians – warfare dynamics can easily cover-up severe acts of religious persecution.

17. BHUTAN

Bhutan made it into international headlines recently, when the country's king married a young commoner this October, another indication for change. The country became a constitutional monarchy in 2008, and is still going through several major changes in politics and in society. As the country transitions from an absolute to constitutional monarchy, signs indicate these changes will affect Christians in a positive way, resulting in Bhutan decreasing in points and ranking on the 2012 World Watch List. Whereas Prime Minister Jigme Thinley states that "democratic culture is gradually taking firm roots" in the country, he absolutely denies the right of the small Christian minority to testify about their faith. Expressing a commonly held belief in Bhutan, he said that there is no reason why Christians should seek to induce others to join their faith. Hence, the parliament, which is largely dominated by one party seen as royalist, is still considering an amendment to the penal code aimed at prohibiting "conversion by coercion or inducement." Christians in the country deny that they would seek to convert people by giving them money or by forcing them to convert.

Though Christian churches are not officially recognized yet, the government is exploring possibilities for registration. The key issue in negotiations will likely be the question of evangelism. At the moment, believers are in a transitional period. The church in Bhutan is no longer an underground church, since Christians are allowed to meet in private homes regularly on Sundays without any interference by authorities; Christians in remote villages encounter more difficulties, though. In that respect, the reporting period saw a considerable improvement of the situation of the Christian minority. However, the situation for Christians will stay ambiguous as long as their status is not officially clear. Another positive development this year is that there are no reports of Christians being arrested, physically harmed, or otherwise badly treated. Discrimination occurs occasionally.

Whether the Christian minority will experience increased religious freedom will depend largely on how the planned anti-conversion-law is drafted. Additionally, the process of recognizing and registering churches along with the establishment of rights and duties needs to be defined. The Christian minority can be seen as a test case regarding the optimistic announcement made by Prime Minister cited above.

18. TURKMENISTAN

In Turkmenistan, the tight grip of the authorities on Christians continues. The slight decrease of points does not imply that the situation for the Christian minority has improved in any way, neither does the loss in rank. But as no kidnappings of Christians or attacks on Christian homes were reported this year, the country moved a bit down the list. As in all other Central Asian countries, there is a considerable difference between registered and unregistered churches. Big churches, like the Russian Orthodox Church, seem to be less affected. All unregistered religious activity is strictly illegal. Obtaining a registration is a highly bureaucratic process. For native Turkmen communities, being registered is simply impossible, for the others it is difficult. But even registered communities face difficulties in finding a meeting place, let alone having a worship gathering outside. Police and secret service keep any Christian activity under surveillance. The lower ranks and local authorities are very biased against the Christians; dozens of believers were detained for short periods.

This strict surveillance makes it difficult for churches to teach their constituency. The printing and importing of all religious literature is effectively banned. Registered communities may ask for an import approval, but normally their application will be rejected. In the reporting period, Turkmen churches were not able to import any Bibles, commentaries, hymn books etc. Indigenous believers face special problems as they have to cope with the open hostility of family, friends and neighborhood. MBBs are under constant pressure to recant their new faith.

One Turkmen pastor (Ilmurad Nurliev) remains in prison after being sentenced to four years due to false allegations against him. He was convicted in October 2010, and despite several amnesties since then, he has not yet been released. Like all other Central Asian states, the outlook for Turkmenistan is not very positive. As long as the authorities consider Christians a disruptive element in society, changes cannot be expected.

19. VIETNAM

Vietnam is one of the countries on this year's World Watch List which climbs in points, but falls slightly in ranking. This is mainly due to the rapidly deteriorating situation for Christians in Egypt, which has "overtaken" the country, at least in terms of ranking. For this reason, the descent of Vietnam on the list should not be equated with an improvement of the situation for Christians. In fact, the opposite is true for Vietnam.

Vietnamese authorities keep a close eye on all Christian activities in the country. Believers face more problems by officials, often being accused of causing "social disturbances," "fighting the local government" or simply "subversion." Church leaders are closely monitored and have to be careful regarding what they say and how they act. Christians are routinely questioned by security police, especially when they witness to others. Several reports demonstrate that the Vietnamese army attacked two Christian Hmong villages in May and July of this year. The result of these attacks was that at least 16 people were injured. The basis for these attacks is a mixture of the government's adherence to a Marxist-Leninist ideology found in the constitution, and continued neglect of the needs of ethnic minorities in the Central Highland bordering Cambodia and Laos.



Christians belonging to the ethnic minorities and tribes are the citizens who face the most challenges for their faith. In tribal areas, village and religious leaders like shamans take offense when Christians come to their villages to preach the Gospel. Because of this, they monitor everyone who is helping new converts and report their activities to local authorities. Using their strong position in society, those local religious leaders often influence local government to take action against the increasing growth of the church. In rural areas, believers have to live in very difficult circumstances. Evangelism and Christian teaching are done secretly, keeping a low profile.

As long as Christians are accused of causing social disturbances due to their faith—be it in court or by rural society—true improvement is unlikely. Ongoing disputes in the tribal areas result in entrenched discrimination of Vietnamese Christians. They will not be viewed as citizens who can make a valuable contribution to their country and society in current conditions.

20. CHECHNYA

Chechnya is formally still a part of the Russian Federation, but the independence wars that opposed Islamic rebels and the Russian army during the '90s are still fresh memories for the general population. Tensions continue to exist and occasional terrorist attacks still occur—including in neighboring Dagestan and other northern Caucasus regions—although Russia has killed many separatist leaders and succeeded in installing a pro-Moscow Chechen regime in 1999.

Chechnya is one of the areas in Russia where Islam plays an important role. Russian legislation is formally applicable in Chechnya, but there are also a couple of local rulings which limit religious liberty. The regime of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov has expressed its willingness to introduce sharia, but this has not been done yet. The government, however, has already implemented clothing regulations. There is an unspoken rule that all women who work for the government should be wearing head scarves at work, and all men working for the government must wear special clothes on Fridays. Slowly but surely, the country is Islamizing.

It is believed that this gradual Islamizing process by the Chechen regime is done out of pragmatism, to satisfy pressures of Islamist groups that are still very strong throughout the country. The pressures to transform Chechnya in all-Islamic caliphate have long existed, and they persist under Kadyrov's government. The largest mosque in the Caucasus has been built in Chechnya's capital, Grozny. The young people are disappointed with both the corrupt government and the unemployment situation.

All indigenous Christians are Muslim Background Believers, who suffer greatly from government and family oppression. There are very few Chechen Christian group meetings and those have no more than 3-5 members. Local authorities and relatives monitor the activities of Christians and put great pressure on them to return to Islam. As in other countries, Christian persecution is not only religious but also political, since Christianity is associated with Russia, with whom they had a war. Chechen believers whose faith becomes public are seen as traitors to Islam and society.

Christian conversion is a great social disgrace on the family, and sometimes the "guilty" are killed to restore honor. When someone is discovered to be a Christian, he risks being killed by his own family members. Fellowship with other believers is almost impossible as well as openly confessing one's faith. The Church endures much hardship. People who have become known as Christians have received serious death threats and have had to leave the country.

The general religious climate in Chechnya has always been Islamic, and the influence of Islam is growing. The only thing that contains the islamization of the country is its political dependence upon Russia, but the risk for a new independent uprising is still present. Chechnya remains one of the most difficult places for Christians in Russia.

21. CHINA

Though China has dropped out of the top twenty for the first time in the WWL, this is due to persecution getting worse in other countries and the Chinese situation remaining relatively stable. Debate does rage over whether it is getting better, and indeed some commentators argue persecution is largely over, or whether it is getting worse. The truth, as usual, is a mixture of both.

Freedom rising?

Christianity continues to grow very rapidly in China today. Figures from even official sources released in 2011 show that 23 million belong to the registered or official Chinese Protestant church, and that there are between 40-50 million unregistered Christians. Some other estimates are much higher. The most rapidly growing strand is the so called “third wave” churches, i.e., neither official, nor rural, but primarily urban, a form of “emerging church” composed of highly educated, young professionals that seek to be more open in their worship and in their relationship with the state and commit to engage with society’s needs. To keep from government interference, they generally cap their meeting numbers at 200, though many in certain cities rent large premises for Sunday meetings, exploiting a legal uncertainty as to whether these churches may own property and function independently.

Over 450 foreign ministries work in China today. House church leaders may hold conferences abroad, and frequently ask for help for their “primary discipleship challenge—dealing with materialism.” Christian bosses often hold Bible studies with their workers in factories. Some networks seek to offer humanitarian aid. Christian bookstores are popping up throughout the country; unprecedented access to sermons, Bible translations, even interactive prayer and counselling, is possible through the Internet for millions of Christians, though not all of them.

In addition, credible sources from the Open Doors network report that government representatives have been carrying on an open dialogue with selected house church leaders, leading many to believe that the government is “finally understanding that the house church Christians are not a political threat to the state.” One political leader was heard to warn his colleagues, “We do not want to be fighting our friends.” Also, there is evidence that the government needs to find allies to deal with the dangerous moral vacuum that is developing as a result of “crony capitalism,” corruption and inequality, and it may consider the church to be such a valuable ally. When house churches assisted so prominently in the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake in May 2008, many point to a change of attitude among political leaders from negative to positive as a result.

Freedom worsening?

China is still a one-party state, with a government that fails to grant most Christians their full religious rights. Even those who worship in officially sanctioned churches are formally allowed to practice their faith only inside the church building. The government prevented China’s Christian delegates from travelling to a Cape Town gathering last October because they were forbidden to sign the Lausanne Covenant ahead of the meeting, which mandated a far broader commitment to evangelism than China would allow. Worse, it is a government that is getting increasingly paranoid in the light of the Arab

Spring, and the budget for internal security in the next five-year plan actually surpasses the defense budget.

Headlines have been dominated in 2011 by a large independent house church in Beijing, the Shouwang church. It was deliberately seeking to clarify the legal position of house churches to determine if house churches could own property without becoming part of the official church. After fruitlessly seeking legal guidance from the authorities, they went ahead, refurbished a third floor of a building and sought to buy it from a landlord. When the landlord was willing to sell, the government stepped in to prevent the church from buying it. The incident became a grim public spectacle on April 11 when members attempted to meet in the new premises. They were barred, and a group held services in protest in the open air. One of the pastors of the 1,000-strong congregation has been put under house arrest, and according to China Aid more than 700 members have been detained for short periods since then. It must be said that the Shouwang church is confronting the government deliberately to gain clarity on whether a genuinely independent status can be achieved for a house church, but it is a stance that has drawn criticism from other house church leaders, one of whom said, "Look, you have to play cat and mouse—we know we can worship if we don't put a sign up and or look too official."

Nevertheless, more severe repression was a reality for some in the reporting period, especially among those who seek to press for rights, justice and supporting the Shouwang church. One pastor, Shi Enhao, was sentenced to two years labor camp in July, supposedly for organizing "illegal meetings," a code for house churches. But the real reason was his belonging to an organization called the Chinese House Church Alliance, where seventeen pastors presented a petition to the national People's Congress on May 10 calling for more freedom. The whereabouts of prominent Christian defense lawyer Gao Zhisheng remains a mystery since his disappearance into police custody in February 2009, and Chinese authorities remain tight-lipped despite well-publicized appeals in 2011. Those who work with Uyghur churches face severe harassment, as China clamps down on Muslim extremism. Xinjiang house church leader Alimujiang Yimiti, jailed for 15 years in August of 2009 for allegedly "unlawfully providing state secrets to overseas organizations" was told in February 2011 that his appeal had been unsuccessful. China Aid organization said the number of Christians detained in the reporting period exceeded 300 over eleven provinces, though few were sentenced.

Future Freedom?

Few expect major changes in the church-state dynamics in the coming years, especially with the tense political environment that always precedes a top leadership change (in Fall 2012 for the Party and in Spring 2013 for the State). The Chinese Communist Party is not about to share power with any group or institution any time soon, and as long as that is the case, the church will be relatively free only insofar as it does not threaten the paranoia of the Party. There is a space of opportunity for churches and ministries. But the rules of engagement are never clear, and as the newer house churches seek to press for more justice and influence in society, and encroach on activities hitherto regarded as the monopoly of the state, it may get worse again.

22. QATAR

The Economist Intelligence Unit summarizes the situation of Qatar as follows: *“The emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, will focus on economic and foreign policy issues. However, given the ongoing regional social unrest, he will be increasingly inclined to initiate domestic political reforms.”* As in other Arab countries, 2011 was characterized by unseen levels of social unrest, although in the case of Qatar, the position of the reigning emir was never threatened. One of the reasons that the reigning emir was never threatened was because he raised the public sector salaries by 60%.

Nearly all Qatari citizens and nationals (approximately 225,000) are by definition either Sunni or Shi'a Muslims, and the state religion is strictly conservative Islam. The majority of the estimated more than 1.8 million people in Qatar are foreigners on temporary employment contracts who are treated as slaves. There are approximately 90,000 Christians in the country, most of them foreign workers.

The Qatari Constitution declares that *‘freedom to practice religious rites shall be guaranteed to all persons in accordance with the law and the requirements of the maintenance of public order and morality.’* In reality, expat Christians are restricted in practicing their faith. The government prohibits proselytizing of non-Muslims and restricts public worship, which is usually only allowed in assigned compounds. Foreign workers who evangelize are frequently deported. Some have had the renewal of their visa denied afterwards. During the current reporting period, several foreign workers were deported for their Christian activities. Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, Coptic, and Asian Christian churches have legal status and only expats can attend. Recognition is hard to obtain, at least 1,500 registered congregants are required.

A Muslim who converts from Islam to another religion is considered an apostate and may face the death penalty. However, no execution or other punishment for apostasy has been recorded since the country's independence in 1971. Nevertheless, converts face severe persecution from their families and peers as well as from the government, which does not recognize their conversion and considers them Muslims. From time to time, we receive reports that Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) are being physically harmed for their faith by family or peers, who view the conversion as harming the honor of the family. As a result of this oppression, MBBs strongly protect their anonymity.

This year, the total of points for Qatar decreased slightly (47 versus 48.5 last year) bringing the country from position 17 to 22. Yet this does not mean the situation for Christians has improved. The minor decrease in points is explained by the fact that we did not receive any reports of physical harm of Christians (though it is very likely that this happens, especially to MBBs) and fewer Christian foreign workers were deported for Christian activities than last year.

It is hard to tell what the future will look like for Qatar. As long as the people are kept satisfied through increased salaries or “Arab Spring pay-offs,” the status quo may well remain in the oil and gas rich Gulf state. However, since the latest riots in the Middle East, the local population seems to be becoming more open to change and this may be the beginning of a more open attitude towards the gospel as well.

23. ALGERIA

Starting in December 2010, major protests in Algeria against the authoritarian regime led to the lifting of the 19-year-old state of emergency, imposed to help the Algerian authorities during a brutal conflict with Islamist rebels in the 1990s. The protests, in which 5 people were killed and over 800 injured, were brought to a halt after only a few months due to massive police repression. Unlike in neighboring countries, these protests did not bring about a regime change. The military government headed by President Abdelaziz Bouteflika is still largely in place and its continuity was not really threatened by the lifting of the state of emergency, although it is of symbolic importance.

Recent Algerian politics have been characterized by high levels of instability, but oppression of Christians has been constant. Church leaders indicate that there is an increase of pressure on Christians and that many doors are closing. The very young Algerian church (mostly consisting of first generation believers) faces many forms of discrimination by the state and by family members. Islamist groups, particularly Salafists, encouraged by the Arab Spring in other North African countries, are increasing their pressure on a government that already works with Islamic parties; however, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) is still forbidden. Islamists are becoming more and more visible and monitor the activity of Christians.

Algeria dropped to position 24 after ranking 22nd on last year's WWL, but it increased in points. In 2011, the situation for Christians in Algeria deteriorated slightly, with an increase in the number of reported incidents. The court case of Karim Siaghi, a Christian convert who was sentenced to 5 years of prison in May, is an example of this. He gave a Christian CD to a neighbor on his request who then claimed Siaghi had insulted Muhammad. Another example of persecution is the church closures by the governor of Bejaïa Province; he stated that all churches in the province were illegal because they were unregistered. The government has not registered any new churches since enforcing Ordinance 06-03 in February 2008, so many Christian citizens continue to meet in unofficial "house churches," which are often homes or business offices of church members. Some of these groups meet openly, while others secretly hold worship services in homes.

The apparently positive news that the EPA (Algerian Protestant Church) finally obtained registration after many years turned out to be a disappointment. Although the exact reasons for the central government to recognize the EPA as a council of Protestant churches are not known, it is believed that the government wanted to give a good impression to the international community. However, no real freedom was given and local churches must still obtain their own registration. The recognition of the EPA did in fact bring more control. On a local level oppression has intensified and no local churches belonging to the EPA have been registered. There are reports of local churches being closed and missionaries detained. The very restrictive ordinance 06-03 that prohibits proselytizing is still enforced. For the coming year, no dramatic improvements in the situation of Algerian Christians are expected.



24. COMOROS

Although Comoros went down in the World Watch List 2012 from position 21 to 24, the persecution dynamics stayed the same: though hardly any incident was reported, government restraints remained tight and mainstream Muslim society firmly stayed alert for “dissidents.” In the context of Islamic extremism both government and society acted as drivers of persecution, but the emphasis was on society.

A referendum passed in May 2009 installed Islam to be the state religion, infringing seriously upon freedom of religion. The penal code prohibits proselytizing for any religion except Islam. Any converts from Islam to Christianity can be prosecuted in court. Therefore, Muslim Background Believers operate in underground fellowships. Only expatriates are allowed to operate churches in the country. Police are vigilant and question foreigners closely so that they don’t distribute religious materials.

The indigenous Muslim community puts much pressure on non-Muslim citizens and foreigners to practice elements of Islam in Comoros, particularly during Ramadan. This intimidates non-Muslims and causes them to worship in seclusion and in fear. To see such harshness from the Islanders is unexpected. Most citizens know each other well and are friendly to each other regardless of faith. The influence of radical elements from Iran, however, causes Muslims in local mosques to be vigilant about Christian activities. A source person stated, “Through them the Christian faith is constantly vilified, they hype the emotions, and encourage persecution.”

Iranian influence goes back to Ahmed Abdallah Mohamed Sambi, the previous President of Comoros elected in May 2006. He was a cleric and businessman who studied Islamic political theory in Iran and was a close friend to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadianajad. They developed bilateral ties on economic issues and exchange of research, technology and information in 2006. Ever since, the two countries have had cultural and political commonalities, and have maintained close relations. The political and religious influence of Iran has been very strong, now even more with the demise of Col. Muamar Gadaffi of Libya, who was trying to compete with Iran.

The new believers have withstood a lot of pressure, and now they have more acceptance in some parts of society than before. For instance, in Gran Comoros the believers have to worship in secret. Relatives of the people have accepted the new faith of the believers, while the other parties (police, extremist elements, Mosque leadership) are not open to this. In the region Anjouan, especially the town Mutsamadu, the believers and their place of worship are known, but nobody has bothered them. This positive tendency is however balanced by a mainstream society that sternly guards Muslim rules and worship, and radical elements from Iran who eagerly correct signs of weakening of anti-Christian sentiment. Whether actively involved or not, government has established the necessary framework for this persecution dynamic. Open Doors expects persecution to grow in the near future. The number of believers is reported to be growing in size and strength. Although numbers are still very limited, that can’t but encourage negative reactions from the different parties involved in the religious setting in the Comoros.

25. AZERBAIJAN

Azerbaijan ranks lower than last year, but increased in points.

The Republic of Azerbaijan, bordering Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Turkey and Iran, is officially a secular state, somewhat comparable to the Turkish model. The majority of its population is Muslim. The government has a negative attitude towards any form of religion. The attitude towards Christians is not different. Fundamentalist Islam is perceived as a destabilizing factor for the country's rulers. The presence of a huge Azeri community in Islamic Iran to the south is a cause of concern.

The influence of traditional Islam is growing in various regions of this country. The oppression of Christians is not only religious, but also nationalistic/ethnic. Azeri believers are considered traitors as Christianity is associated with the country's archenemy, Armenia.

The general perception of Christians in Azerbaijan is negative. According to our reports, official checks are becoming increasingly strict. The government has become more active in controlling religion, and, compared to previous years, the position of Christians has deteriorated. All churches and religious groups were required to renew their registration by Jan. 1, 2010, but since that date no new churches have been able to get registration. Unregistered religious activities are punishable, and the fines on breaking the law are high, but successful registration is close to impossible. Almost all Protestant denominations are still without legal status. Private homes cannot be used for holding religious services. Congregations without registration get into trouble with the police. Protestant churches are raided, with church leaders arrested or fined.

There is no freedom at all to build church buildings. Churches need explicit permission to do so, and this is hardly ever granted. Over the past year no such permission was given. Christians often refrain from even beginning the permission procedure. Under the December 2010 legislation, it is illegal for unregistered churches to meet, but some take the risk anyway.

Many Christians are unable to find or keep jobs and are watched closely by the secret services. The role of the secret services and police is important, but there is also a Committee on Religious Affairs which controls almost everything. However, the number of indigenous believers continues to grow, and some continue to be active in outreach despite the risk. The growth of the church is encouraging, but under increasing legislative restrictions, oppression is also expected to increase.

26. LIBYA

Libya drops one position on the WWL to number 27, but increases in points.

Under the despotic rule of Muammar Gaddafi, the situation for Christians in Libya was already extremely harsh. There were some freedoms for expat Christians, who are mostly temporary workers from neighboring African countries. Black and non-Arab Africans faced racism. Immediately after the revolution, it was difficult for them as they were seen as possible mercenaries working for Gaddafi. During Gaddafi's reign, Libya did not have a real constitution. There was a book with some legal prescriptions called the Green Book, but in practice Gaddafi's will was law. The feared and omnipresent secret police made sure that restrictions on the organization of church activities and distribution of Christian literature were enforced and evangelism was criminalized.

As in most Muslim countries, converting from Islam brings social pressure. Muslim Background Believers are always at risk from their families; there were some reported cases of beatings by family members. Most Libyan Christians are afraid to meet with other believers, as any kind of religious gathering (other than Islamic) for Libyans is forbidden. Expats are allowed to have their own churches, but Libyans are not allowed to attend. This last year, many expat churches had their permits withdrawn, and at least two Christians were imprisoned and possibly tortured. Christians that are released from prison are generally expelled from the country.

The revolutions in neighboring Egypt and Tunisia, and the military support by NATO, gave Libyans the courage to fight Gaddafi, who had been in power since 1969. But after a bloody civil war that led to the death of Gaddafi, it is feared the future will be worse than under Gaddafi. During the uprisings that started in February and led to civil war, Christians were more open about their faith in Jesus Christ. These Christians now fear the consequences of their witness. Because of the unrest, 75% of the expat Christians left the country and it is not clear how many Christians remain or will return in the future.

The National Transition Council (NTC) that took over after months of fighting has already revealed its intentions regarding religious freedom by setting a dangerous precedent. Under their supervision the Saint Georges Church in Tripoli was ransacked when they took control of Tripoli. Also, two Christians have been held hostage by the NTC because of importing Christian books. The NTC is expected to implement sharia law and make Libya an even more Islamic state than before. The then president of the NTC publically announced a "democracy according to sharia," which is a contradiction in itself. This would make the position of Christians even more difficult than before, in a country where all citizens were already considered Sunni Muslims by law.



27. OMAN

Oman has seen protests and civil unrest since January 2011, which caused the deaths of two people. However, after promising to create 50,000 jobs, allowing citizens more freedom of speech, improving the social welfare system and changing the cabinet, most turmoil faded away.

There is no visible change in the situation of the local Christians. The Omani Constitution declares that *“the freedom to practice religious rites in accordance with recognized customs is guaranteed provided that it does not disrupt public order or conflict with accepted standards of behavior.”* Islam is the state religion and legislation is based on Islamic law. All public school curriculums include instruction in Islam. Apostasy is not a criminal offense, but it is not respected by the legal system either, which assumes that all citizens are Muslims. The very concept of change of faith for an Omani citizen is an anathema. A converts faces problems under the Personal Status and Family Legal Code, which prohibits a father from having custody of his children if he leaves Islam. During the reporting period, deportations of foreign workers (because of Christian activities) continued.

Almost the entire Christian population (around 35,000) is expatriate; there are only a few indigenous Christians. All religious organizations must register, and Christian meetings are monitored for political messages and nationals attending. Foreign Christians are allowed to discretely worship in private homes or work compounds. Their facilities are restricted in order not to offend nationals. Muslim-background believers (MBBs) risk persecution from family and society. MBBs can lose their family, house and job and even could be killed.

There was a minor increase in points (now 42 versus 41 for the last WWL) for Oman which was mainly caused by the above mentioned deportations and by more information on the constitution and national laws, which are more restrictive on religious freedom than previously assumed. The small increase in points does not lead to a higher ranking on the WWL: Oman holds position 42 (versus 41 last year). This apparent paradox is explained by the considerable increase in numbers for other countries on this year's list.

28. BRUNEI

Brunei is a small state on the South East Asian island of Borneo, embedded in the Malaysian State. The observation of the small Christian minority has tightened, thus bringing a slight increase in the country's position in this year's World Watch List.

Brunei Darussalam is an Islamic nation, based on an ideology called Melayu Islam Beraja (Malay Muslim Monarchy). The religion of Brunei Darussalam is the Muslim Religion according to the Shafeite sect of that religion. All other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony by the person professing it in any part of the country. In practice, this means that only non-Malays are able and allowed to choose their faith. If a Malay converts, this "disturbs peace and harmony" and he is automatically scheduled for re-education to the Islamic faith.

In the reporting period the Sultan announced his aim to introduce an Islamic Criminal Law which will complicate the situation for the small Christian minority even further, especially for Muslim-background believers known to have converted. The monitoring of churches and Christian meetings seems to have increased. The state sends spies to those gatherings, so Christians have to exercise more caution. In one case, a pastor was openly warned by authorities to be cautious with his Christian activities and with whom he meets.

It is very difficult for existing churches to get the government's permission to renovate a church building. Permission for expansions is never granted, whether churches are registered or not. Importing Bibles, Christian literature, and other materials is restricted to personal use only. Importing for ministry purposes is not possible. Materials in the national language are especially suspect and thus difficult to obtain. Accordingly, churches have to be careful; they experience challenges in training and work.

As long as the state demonstrates preference for one specific religion, denies freedom of religious choice, and links conversion with peace and harmony in society, nothing substantial will change for the Christian minority.

29. MOROCCO

The revolutionary wave that went through North Africa and the Middle East known as the Arab Spring has also flooded Morocco. In the case of Morocco, the protests did not bring the monarchy to an end, but King Mohammed VI had to adopt a number of reforms in order to restore social peace. The protests were finally subdued in July, forcing the King to vast political concessions, including government changes, a referendum on constitutional reforms, a greater commitment to respect civil rights and an end to corruption.

Out of pragmatism, Mohammed VI—who is considered a direct descendent of the prophet Mohammed, the founder of Islam—has given in to the pressure of the moderate Islamic Justice and Development Party (PJD). In the parliamentary elections that were held at the end of 2011, the PJD obtained a huge victory, and based on the new constitutional procedures, must now provide a Prime Minister.

The Moroccan church is not recognized by the authorities, but the expat Church is. The expat Moroccan church has always suffered from oppression, although it was never as harsh as in neighboring North African countries. The main source of persecution is Muslim fundamentalist influence on the authorities and in society.

Islam is the official state religion, but the constitution provides some freedom of religion. There are, nevertheless, a number of practical restrictions in exercising this freedom. For example, the government prohibits the distribution of Christian religious materials, bans all proselytizing, and tolerates several small religious minorities with varying degrees of restrictions. Foreign Christian communities openly practice their faith. Voluntary conversion is not a crime in Moroccan law, and is therefore implicitly accepted. However, Moroccan Muslims who convert to Christianity are treated as criminals by the police and face rejection from friends and most family members.

Compared to 2011, the situation of Christians in Morocco seems to have improved a little. Morocco, nevertheless, goes up on the WWL, basically because Islamist forces are becoming more visible in the country. While 2010 was characterized by big pressures on the Moroccan church and the expulsion of over 150 missionaries and Christian expatriate workers, 2011 did not see many incidents against Christians. The authorities dedicated most of their energy and resources to control the uprisings throughout the country, which gave them less time to monitor Moroccan Christians and churches.

The Arab Spring gave the younger Christian generation a feeling of hope and so they are encouraged to struggle for more freedom. The future will tell whether this hope will become a reality, or if government restrictions will increase again. "Can Morocco's Islamists check al-Qaeda?" *Le Monde Diplomatique* asked in 2007. This is still a valid question today. The answer to this question will depend on how moderate the Islamists in government will be, and if moderate Muslims will be able to form a coalition to withstand the pressures of al-Qaeda and other fundamentalist groups.



30. KUWAIT

“The popular uprisings witnessed across the Middle East and North Africa region since early 2011 have inspired some protests in Kuwait, but these are unlikely to lead to any radical changes in the system,” stated a November 30th report of the Economist Intelligence Unit. However, Kuwait’s Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah and his cabinet resigned in December 2011 over an alleged corruption row with their parliamentary opponents.

The Kuwaiti Constitution declares that the State protects the freedom of belief. However, it also mentions some limitations: the practice of religion should not conflict with public order or morals and be in accordance with established customs. The government implemented these restrictions from time to time. According to the constitution, Islam is the state religion and Islamic law (sharia) is an important source of legislation.

Conversion from Islam to another religion is not permitted and the government actively supported proselytism by Sunni Muslims. For MBBs, the main persecution engines are family and Muslim extremists, and to a lesser extent authorities. There are only a few hundred Kuwaiti believers (MBBs), as most Christians are migrant workers from outside the country. The MBB number is growing rapidly and they are becoming bolder and bolder in sharing their faith. Converts risk discrimination, harassment, police monitoring of their activities, arbitrary arrest and detention, physical and verbal abuse. Also, a change of faith (away from Islam) is not recognized and is likely to lead to legal problems in personal status and property matters in court. The government requires Islamic religious instruction for all students in public and private schools. Teaching Christianity is prohibited, even to legally recognized Christians. The Christian community mostly consists of foreign migrant workers. Expat Christians are relatively free to worship informally. There are four registered denominations which meet in compounds. However, these are too small for the number of people gathering and local Kuwaitis are annoyed by the noise and traffic of these overcrowded meeting places. The extreme difficulty to obtain property to gather for worship is an extra burden. On the other hand, the sharing of meeting places has encouraged greater cooperation and fellowship among churches.

The situation of religious freedom for Christians has been more or less stable over the past few years. During the previous reporting period we received reports of a Christian who had to flee for his faith and a Christian was arrested. Also during this reporting period, a Christian was forced to flee. We did not report any arrests, but this does not necessarily mean it did not happen. This year Open Doors gathered more information on the constitution and national laws, which are more restrictive on religious freedom than previously assumed. This led to a minor increase in points, from 40 last year to 40.5 this year, bringing Kuwait to place 30 from position 28 last year.

31. TURKEY

Turkey went from rank 30 in 2011 to rank 31 this year, but increased in points.

In name, Turkey is a secular state, but various forms of persecution of Christians exist. Government restrictions on religious freedom basically originate in interpretations of the secular constitution and laws of the country, which are biased against non-Muslim minorities. There is a huge difference between the formal interpretation of the country's secular legislation and the informal practices by government officials, police officers and judges.

Government restrictions, social hostilities and nationalism are important sources of persecution, causing human rights violations (hate crimes, unfair judicial treatments, discrimination, etc.). People with a Muslim background who are interested in the gospel are often victims of strong discrimination by their families. In a patriarchal society such as in Turkey, a conversion of one of the family members is thought to bring shame on the family. Many converted Christians are disinherited or are told they are no longer part of the family. Muslims who convert to the Christian faith risk losing their jobs. The government remains passive when they learn of these types of discrimination, because it only concerns a very small minority.

Some churches are registered and have authorizations to organize church services. Preaching in public is allowed, but these preachers risk harassment both by police and Turkish nationalists. Missionary work is possible, but missionaries do not get a residency permit if they request it to work as a missionary.

A Bible translation in modern Turkish was made available years ago, and the printing and distribution of Bibles and Christian literature in churches is permissible, though open distribution results in problems.

Christians engaged in religious advocacy are occasionally threatened or pressured by government and state officials. Proselytizing by non-Muslim religious groups is socially unacceptable and sometimes dangerous. Police officers are present in some church services to protect church-goers, but also to monitor the activities of Christians. However, this protection is intermittent, and from time to time church properties are vandalized.

The traditionally secular state, under constant protection by the national army, has in recent years become more open to public expressions of Islam under the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President Abdullah Gül of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), in power since 2002.

When Turkey was actively negotiating its membership in the European Union, the country adopted a series of reforms in order to comply with the Copenhagen criteria. These initially contributed to increased religious tolerance in the country and protection for minorities. The Malatya murders in 2007 negatively affected Turkey's image on the international stage, and the trial against the murderers is still ongoing. The needed reforms, however, were not completed, and while some improvements can be seen, the country has not succeeded in completely eliminating discrimination against Christians. Only the Armenian and Greek Orthodox denominations are officially recognized by the government. Oppression of Christians is expected to continue, as the legal and social position of Christian minorities is not improving.



33. INDIA

India's staying in the same place in the WWL this year shows that conditions have not improved. Disruptive violence against evangelists, pastors and church gatherings continues to occur on a monthly basis, usually where the Christians live and work in remote or rural areas. Compiling from several sources, a total of 109 incidents of anti-Christian violence were recorded in the reporting period, usually where a pastor or evangelist would be attacked and badly beaten by a mob, and the authorities failed to respond in an adequate fashion.

The main persecutors are mobs organized by extremist Hindu organizations who peddle their exclusivist ideology, *Hindutva*, which believes that those belonging to other religions have no place in India and should be forced to leave. Despite being voted out of national power, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—the political party backed by Hindu extremists that pushes the Hindu extremist agenda—is in power in states where two-thirds of the population live, and they continue to seek to embed their extremist and revisionist version of their religion into the cultural mainstream, with some success. "Hindu extremism going viral is the greatest threat to the church today," said a church leader in Delhi in August. Local governments and police often side with those who commit the violence, resulting in a virtual amnesty for thugs.



No large scale violence of the kind witnessed in Orissa in 2008 was seen in the reporting period, but consequences continue. According to the national minorities commission reporting late in 2011, of the 827 criminal cases registered in Kandhamal, 512 cases have been formally charged, and 361 people in 65 cases have been convicted. But a total of 2,246 people have been acquitted due to lack of proper evidence against them, so far. The remaining 321 cases are under trial.

Sporadic violence continues in the area and last Christmas (2010) some 200 extremists barged into a Christmas day celebration in the village of Koyi Konda, beat up the worshippers, destroyed furniture, and set fire to ten Christian homes and crop fields. In Maharashtra state on May 2, Hindu extremists stopped the construction of a church building and organized a boycott against the local Christians, even to the extent of preventing their children attending the local school. Such incidents are almost commonplace, and accompanied by the usual accusation that the Christians have been guilty of "forced conversion" or "conversion by allurement/inducement"—an accusation that carries a legal penalty.

Persecution is drawn due to the amazing success Christianity is having among the low castes and untouchables, or Dalits, which threatens the Hindu leaders. The Christian Church is growing significantly. Officially Christians form 2.3% of the 1.2+ billion population, but there is credible evidence to suggest the percentage may be higher than 5%, or over 70 million Christians. There is also increasing tension between Muslims and Christians in Kerala, Kashmir and Assam, and Maoist insurgents and Buddhist fundamentalists are threatening Christians in certain regions also, a minor but growing trend.

Despite this, India remains a largely pluralistic country, and most Christian leaders find their main problems deal with the grinding poverty levels. Forty percent of India's population under 5 are malnourished; a staggering 72% of Indian children never attend high school; there are 60 million child laborers and still 600 million people do not have access to electricity. An Indian legislator, Dr Shashi Tharoor, says India "is destined not be a superpower, but super-poor."

While most Christians remain relatively free, many parts of the country remain key battlegrounds between Hindu extremists and Christians. The extremists are especially regrouping in the rural areas, setting up schools to raise up a new "Hindu Taliban," and even educated leaders are seeking to make Hinduism a much less tolerant religion. According to Rev Richard Howell, the General Secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of India, "...Christians in India continue to face the worst ever persecution in India." Christians are bracing for increasing persecution in the future.

33. BURMA/MYANMAR

“The wind of change streams through the country!” In a nutshell, that is what observers like the International Crisis Group say about Myanmar after its transition to a new, semi-civilian government in March. Several positive signs are observable since the new leadership has taken office, stirring hopes that significant changes are indeed underway. Two of these signs are the comeback into the political arena for Aung San Suu Kyi and the possible re-admission of her party, the National League for Democracy, and the release of hundreds of imprisoned political dissidents. But there are some dark shadows on the bright prospects connected with the new government: the majority of the so-called “political prisoners,” totaling at least two thousand, are still imprisoned. Also the army’s war against ethnic rebels—most of whom are Christians by name and religious affiliation—is at least as intense as before.

According to several reports, the Burmese Army repeatedly entered Christian villages of the Kachin tribe, harassing and harming believers and sometimes forcing them to serve as porters. In one case in August this year, the army turned a Christian village into a full-fledged military outpost, including fortifications, trenches and landmines. Though the believers sent a letter of complaint to the authorities, nothing has been done to help the Christians by the new government. This event fits into a long history of ethnic conflict with the Kachin tribe, which lives in the northern border region to China and India. As international observers stated, the ongoing reaction of the armed forces doesn’t match the rhetoric of the new president speaking about reconciliation.

On the other hand, a new Human Rights Commission was established in September, with minorities duly represented on it. A renowned and respected member of the Christian Kachin minority is serving as a member. As the commission has only recently been created, it remains to be seen how independently this commission will operate and what specific responsibilities it will have. Nevertheless, its formation is an encouraging sign. Thus, in the 2012 World Watch List, Burma slightly decreased in points, but dropped considerably in ranking due to changes within other countries. Because of this considerable drop, it is necessary to stress that there are still no dramatic visible changes to persecution within Burma.

Whether the winds of change will alter the predicament of the Christian minority remains unclear. Pressure from society and the military appears to be unchanged at this time. One Protestant church leader expressed concern, saying the new measures could be a short-lived effort to get the rotating chair of ASEAN (the association of South East Asian States) for 2014—which the country obtained recently—while convincing the international community to lift its sanctions.

34. TAJIKISTAN

This year, Tajikistan ranks a little lower than in 2011. Unfortunately, this has nothing to do with an improvement in the situation for the Christian minority in the country, but rather with the unusual situation of the split of Sudan which boosted Northern Sudan up almost 20 places in the list. Though there have been no substantial changes, the country dropped down two places on the list.

The new laws on religion distinguish between registered and unregistered churches in a very strict way and are likely to cause more trouble for MBBs in the future. It is not completely clear how the laws will be implemented, but given the experiences of the believers until now, a further deterioration seems possible.

In August 2011, authorities introduced a new “Parental Responsibility Law” which holds parents fully responsible for the religious activities of their children. This law singles out Tajikistan compared to the other Central Asian states—less in practical, but rather on the legal and ideological level. It had been difficult and cumbersome to conduct Sunday School activities or youth camps in the past, but now the new law restricts all participation of persons under age 18 in any religious activity, except funerals. Children can only receive religious education in government-licensed institutes. More than half of Tajikistan’s population is under age 18. Parents disobeying this law face heavy fines and even prison sentences from between 5 and 8 years. The government recently proved its determination in religious matters by stopping young Muslims entering mosques for the Eid-al-Fitr prayers celebrating the end of Ramadan in August 2011. Given this example, the small Christian minority might face growing problems in the future.

Believers, especially MBBs, encounter attacks and harassment, and are monitored and being pressurized into renouncing their Christian faith. A very strong source of persecution is the family, but also society as a whole. As long as the overall situation in the Central Asian region does not change, the Christian minority will face constant and probably increasing restrictions on their freedom.

35. TUNISIA

Tunisia is the country that started the movement of demonstrations, protests and revolutions that spread throughout North Africa and the Middle East, later known as the “Arab Spring.” It is also the country where the democratic transition seems to have the greatest chance of success based on its politically activist tradition and its generally well-educated population. Tunisia is known as the most liberal country in the region, depending heavily on tourism. This being said, the country faces important challenges. According to the International Crisis Group (ICG), Tunisia *“will need to balance the urge for radical political change against the requirement of stability; integrate Islamism into the new landscape; and, with international help, tackle deep socio-economic problems.”*

A broad coalition of the unemployed, lawyers, intellectuals, middle class workers and trade unions demanding radical political change was behind the Jasmine revolution of December 18, 2010, that led to the ousting of President Ben Ali and Prime Minister Ghannouchi. In October 2011, the first election was held. These elections were won by the Islamic Ennahda party, which has already announced its intention to move towards the implementation of sharia law and to transform Tunisia into an Islamic state.

Due to the high levels of polarization in Tunisia between the liberal, secularist elite and the well-organized Islamists, it is unclear how much of the Islamic agenda will be implemented, but the country has been affected by constant turmoil in the aftermath of the revolution. Radical Muslims, most of them exiled to France, are returning to the country and spreading their fundamentalist messages. They are organizing violent demonstrations that the weakened security services of the government find difficult to contain.

The extremely violent murder of Father Marek Rybinski, a Polish priest and Salesian missionary, in February 2011 is a clear example of the increasing religious violence in the country. Another example of religious violence is the case of a local church leader who had to leave the country because of grave threats against the lives of him and his family.

At the moment, although the constitution of Tunisia respects freedom of religion and conversion from Islam is not prohibited, representatives of the administration at every level often act differently. Foreign Christian residents experience more inspections and suspect their phones to be tapped. Pastors of expat churches are monitored, and importation of Christian books in the Arabic language is obstructed. National churches cannot register—since independence (1956) no new church has been granted official registration—and local Christians are questioned and beaten once their conversion is known.

Reports from the field indicate that pressure on Christians, coming both from the authorities and from the families of Muslim-background believers, has increased since the Jasmine revolution. In this context, it is yet to be seen whether the democratic transition will improve the situation of the small Christian population in the country.

36. SYRIA

Violence and protests against the government of President Bashar al-Assad have lasted for months, and the situation in the country can best be described as chaotic. “The current stage [of Syria] is defined by an explosive mix of heightened strategic stakes tying into a regional and wider international competition on the one hand and emotionally charged attitudes, communal polarization and political wishful thinking on the other,” analyzes the International Crisis Group in its most recent brief on Syria (the Nov. 24, 2011, brief on Syria by the International Crisis Group). Three central messages can be distilled from this analysis: the social and political climate of Syria is extremely explosive—the country is on the verge of civil war—and if the current regime would collapse, whatever regime replaces it will not necessarily be more democratic.

Syria has more than 20 million inhabitants and 1.9 million of them are Christians. The Christian community lived in relatively peaceful circumstances under the secular regime of President Bashar al-Assad. As long as Christians did not disturb communal harmony or threaten the government, they were tolerated and had freedom of worship. The recognized church of Syria is not a hidden or secret church. It is respected in society, although every Christian meeting is monitored by the secret police. However, these churches often cannot and will not evangelize openly in Syria because of political pressure and agreements with other religious leaders. Muslim background believers face many problems, mostly from family and friends.

The government has to deal with extremist Islamic groups who are against Christians and other minorities. Many extremist foreign fighters (mostly from other Arabic countries) have been living and operating in Syria since March 2011, as a hegemony battle between the Iranian axis and the U.S.-Saudi/Gulf Arab axis is being fought in the country. These foreign fighters have been entering houses and threatening many Christians and other minority groups. Anti-Christian sentiments are clearly on the increase amidst the current violent and chaotic situation in the country.

As one of the minority religions, most Christians have been supportive of the Alawite regime in the past, since that regime gave them relative peace and rest. But nowadays most Christians are not supportive of any regime; they just want a peaceful agreement and situation. But supporting the Alawite regime in the past has made them vulnerable to attacks from the opposition. They are also at risk for religious reasons, as fundamental Islamic groups oppose any religion other than Islam in the country.

Since March mostly Sunni and Salafi protesters have been taking the streets to demonstrate against the government. Frustrations of the majority religious group have mounted after decades of domination by the minority Alawite elites. Anti-Christian tensions first appeared in the form of threats. During several demonstrations, Christians were forced to participate or were called upon to immigrate to Lebanon; Alawites are threatened with death. The situation has further worsened. Recently, Christian meeting places—mainly churches—have been raided, resulting in physical damage. In one city, Christians are afraid to leave their homes and do not attend church meetings any more. Local Christians report that fundamentalist taxi drivers made a vow that they will harm any unveiled female client. These women, mostly less



orthodox Muslims and Christians, are being kidnapped, raped or even killed. Some months ago, two Christian women were kidnapped in Damascus. One managed to jump out of the driving car, but the other was taken and remains missing. Amidst this threatening situation, Christians intend to celebrate Christmas quietly, so they don't draw too much attention to themselves. Considering these developments, it is not amazing that the total of points for Syria increased from 34.5 last year to 39 this year; putting it on place 36 (from 38).

What can be expected for the future of Christians in Syria? As long as the Alawites remain united, the power continues to be in the hands of the Al Assad clan. The Alawite will continue to control the military-intelligence apparatus, and the Baath party will continue to hold monopoly on the political system. Bashir's regime seems to be quite firmly seated. In spite of the current deplorable human rights situation in the country, Christians prefer a continuation of a secular regime that doesn't have much religious input from Islam. Though it is hard to predict how events will unfold, a change of government is expected to lead to a situation of anarchy and struggle for power. This will likely result in an Islamist extremist take over—leading to a worse situation for Christians and other minority groups. Should that happen, Christians will either be isolated or driven from the country en masse—a situation comparable to the one in Iraq.

37. UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

The United Arab Emirates is one of the most liberal countries in the Gulf; expatriates make up around 85 percent of the population. The constitution provides for religious freedom on the condition that established customs, public policy or public morals are not violated. The government restricts this freedom in practice. Christians in the United Arab Emirates, who are mainly foreign workers, are mostly persecuted by the government's discriminatory attitude and society's hostile attitude towards Christianity, resulting sometimes in deportation. The government is placing restrictions on the development of facilities for Christian migrants. Persecution also comes from those community members who monitor Christian migrants. This is a reality in the whole country, although smaller more conservative Emirates are more restrictive than the larger ones.

Muslim Background Believers are under severe pressure by relatives, family and Muslim society due to Islamic government, law and culture. All citizens are defined as Muslims and the law denies Muslims the freedom to change religion under penalty of the death. To avoid death, social stigma or other penalties, converts may be pressured to return to Islam, to hide their faith or to travel to another country where their conversion is allowed. There are very few local believers among the Muslim population. Evangelism is prohibited, but non-Muslim groups can worship freely in dedicated buildings or private homes.

The total number of points for the United Arab Emirates increased slightly from 37.5 to 38.5, which remarkably brings the country from position 34 to 37 because of considerable gains in points of the countries close to UAE on the WWL. This year Open Doors gathered more information on the constitution and national laws, which are more restrictive on religious freedom than previously assumed. In general, religious freedom did not change much for Christians during the current reporting period. Arrests, imprisonment and deportation can occur for expatriate Christians who evangelize or distribute Christian literature openly, but we did not receive reports of this. There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and societal pressures discouraged conversion from Islam to other religions. Christians in the country notice many opportunities for Muslim—Christian dialogue. Though the Arab Spring did not affect the UAE much, the latest developments in the Middle East do lead the local people to question what good leadership is about. Allegedly, this leads to opportunities for sharing the gospel.

38. ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia went from position 43 to 38 in the WWL, reflecting a higher number of incidents related to persecution. The structural picture remained the same, although underlying dynamics are changing rapidly.

The engines of persecution are twofold: ecclesiastical arrogance and Islamic extremism. In the past the main persecutor was the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC). The EOC persecuted the emerging Protestant churches, and also renewal movements within their own ranks. Meanwhile the Islamists have come more and more alongside as persecutors of Protestants as well as EOC members in the areas where they are predominant. So, the persecutors are more found within social groups than within government circles. For instance, no law exists that would stop the local church to openly integrate new believers after conversion. However, villagers and families are often against it. So now and then EOC and Islamic leaders “encourage” mobs to attack churches and converts—their agendas are totally different but their “enemy” is common as is their strategy.

EOC still is a source of persecution of Christians in Ethiopia. Their leaders are feeling that the church is losing its historical dominance. They think Protestants and Islamists are taking their members in an attempt to destroy the church and the nation. For them, the very existence of the nation is deeply associated with EOC itself. EOC members, unlike recent memories, are showing strong commitment and devotion to their religion. Protestant believers and their churches are targeted in diverse ways. The “hard core” group inside EOC is making life hard to the renewal movements within EOC. It accuses them to be secret agents of Protestants. Priests want to stop believers from evangelism. A number of priests and other workers were kicked out of the church after the group reported they are “reformationalists.”

Islamism is another source of persecution in the country. Muslims feel uneasy to see their members being evangelized by Protestant churches and they want to stop it. Above that, the unprecedented shift of Islamism in Ethiopia from Sunni to Wahhabism is a negative development. Islamic Da’wa leaders and preachers from Arab countries are believed to have promoted intolerance against others and assertive attitudes.

Striking in the Ethiopian context is the use of false accusations. Almost all imprisonments were a result of fabricated cases. Officials in the country seemed to be aware of international pressure and they fiercely reject any claim of human rights abuses. Every time believers went to jail countless excuses were invented. Insult of other religions, illegal meeting, illegal construction, theft, and threat to public peace were some of them. False witnesses were used and the verdict given.

The tension between EOC and the Islamists has won government’s attention. A “Forum of Religions Dialogue for Peace and Development” was formed under the blessing of the Ministry of Federal Affairs. Leaders from EOC, Islamists and Evangelicals are members of this Forum. Meanwhile some Church leaders are reporting that the Forum is used to enforce “commonly agreed” restrictions such as the issue of evangelization outside churches. For instance, in Benishangul Gumuz State, believers are not allowed to discuss religion in public gathering places, offices, markets, schools etc. Churches in a town in Oromia State are told they can no longer hold mass gatherings in public places.

(Oromia State is the place where many Islamist attacks have taken place.) In other words, it seems renewal movements within EOC and Protestant churches are squeezed between the EOC and Islamism.

Ethiopia is a country to keep an eye on. Protestant churches are the fastest growing movement in the country. "Underground movements" both in EOC and Islam dominated areas have been reported as making incredible progress in their work. EOC and Islamism will continue to see them as a threat. Besides, Islamism also targets mainstream EOC. Open Doors expects that in the short term persecution of Christians, in the broad sense of the word "Christian," will increase sharply—the more so because extremist Islam in Ethiopia is fuelled by external sources. The unresolved conflict in the eastern part of the country is also attracting some extremist groups like Al Shabaab from neighboring Somalia.

39. DJIBOUTI

Djibouti maintains the same score as last year and stays in 39th place on the WWL 2012. Although Open Doors had limited access to information on the country, it estimates the persecution situation basically has not changed. The main persecution engine is Islamic extremism.

According to the July–December 2010 U.S. Department of State International Religious Freedom Report: “The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.” Although Islam is the state religion, according to the IRF report, “The government imposed no sanctions on those who choose to ignore Islamic teachings or to practice other faiths.” IRF’s conclusion on family issues however negatively qualifies this impression. “The government allows civil marriage only for non-Muslim foreign residents. Muslims are required to marry in a religious ceremony. A non-Muslim man may marry a Muslim woman only after converting to Islam.” According to the family code, “impediment to a marriage occurs when a Muslim woman marries a non-Muslim.” Due to limited information it is difficult to further qualify the stance of the government towards Christians, especially Muslim Background Believers, in the country. Incidental reports from preceding years on structural persecution elements however distinguished between “registered expatriate churches” and “local believers,” most of who are “secret believers.” Such distinctions make it likely that government, too, is involved in infringing upon the right of religious freedom.



The July–December 2010 International Religious Freedom Report stated, “There were occasional reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Societal norms and customs discouraged proselytizing by non-Muslims and conversion from Islam; non-Muslim religious groups generally did not engage in public proselytizing.” For fear of discovery new believers do often not disclose their new belief to their family and local community, and remain “secret believers.”

The dynamics of persecution are typical for Islamic extremism as driver of persecution—both government and social groups/society are involved in protecting the religious status quo with Islam as state religion. It seems however that family and local community are more active drivers of persecution than government. Given the scarcity of direct sources of input for the reporting period it is difficult to sensibly indicate how the situation might develop in the future.

40. JORDAN

Jordan experienced a moderate 'Arab Spring'. The government reacted to local protests for political reform with large public sector pay rises and food and energy subsidies. So far, this has worked well and the protests have been limited.

Known as one of the most Western-orientated countries in the Middle East, traditional Christians experience a certain extent of religious freedom. According to the Jordanian constitution 'The State shall safeguard the free exercise of all forms of worship and religious rites in accordance with the customs observed in the Kingdom, unless such is inconsistent with public order or morality.' Islam is the religion of the State and the Jordanian legal system is based on sharia (Islamic law) and laws of European origin. However, leaving Islam is prohibited and 'public proselytism' of Muslims is against government policy.

In general, relations between Muslims and Christians were peaceful. Nevertheless Muslims who become Christians still fall under jurisdiction of sharia courts and generally maintain a low profile to avoid harassment or interrogation. In the past, family members have filed charges against them in Islamic law courts, leading to the loss of custody of their children, annulment of their marriage contracts and depriving them of other civil rights. They face discrimination and the threat of mental and physical abuse by their families, government officials, and at times community members. Security service personnel reportedly questioned MBBs on their beliefs, threatened court and other actions, and promised rewards for returning back to Islam, such as job opportunities. They also withheld certificates of good behavior needed for job applications or to open a business and told employers to dismiss them.



For a few years there were considerable tensions between the evangelical churches and the traditional churches in the Hashemite Kingdom. These seem to have eased off mostly but the difficulties between the various denominations have hardly been reduced. Most new believers are from the nominal Christian community, but recently more and more Muslims are coming to faith. Whereas the church as a whole is declining in numbers, the evangelical church is experiencing encouraging growth, doubling from 1995 to 2010. As a result the authorities are increasingly monitoring churches, and security officers in civilian clothes are present outside churches of some Christian denominations. However some church leaders said the presence of security officers was meant to protect them following threats against Christian groups in the region.

The situation of religious freedom for Christians in Jordan has not changed dramatically compared to last year. Like last year, the country has 33.5 points and holds position 40. There have been no major incidents against Christians during the reporting period. Especially MBBs were pressured by local authorities, mostly monitored and sometimes detained. MBBs were also put under pressure by their families and some radical Islamic groups.

In Jordan, Christians remain a community under relative pressure. The numbers of Christians have been declining since the country's independence especially due to lower birth rates and high emigration rates. On the other hand, large numbers of Iraqi Christians have entered the country—a development that is still continuing. There is also a large number of Muslim refugees entering the country from Iraq, Palestinian Territories and Syria, which together with the rise of politicized Islam put increasing pressure on Christians, especially on evangelicals and MBBs.

41. CUBA

Cuba is one of the few remaining communist regimes in the world. Some years ago, the country's aging leader, Fidel Castro, made a place for his brother Raúl in the government, but the regime stayed essentially the same; desired changes did not take place. Cuba continues to isolate itself from the rest of the world and function under totalitarian control.

Christians make up almost 57 percent of the population, and a majority of them are Roman Catholics. The past years have seen great growth for Protestant Christians. Many religious organizations reported a significant increase in membership as well as revival, especially among the young. Most churches reported increased participation in religious instruction for children because government schools no longer schedule competing activities on Saturdays or Sundays.

The constitution provides for religious freedom, but the government restricts this in practice. Churches must register, which is difficult. There are many unregistered house churches that have no legal status and experience harassment from the authorities. The government restricts the construction of new church buildings and permission is often hard to obtain.

Permission to print Christian literature locally is hard to obtain. Bibles, Bible study materials and Sunday school materials are in extremely short supply. The growing numbers of unregistered house churches have no access to these materials, as Bibles are distributed in Cuba through official channels and to registered churches only.

The totalitarian regime allows no competitors of any kind. Religious groups complain about widespread surveillance and infiltration by state security agents. Pastors and Christians are sometimes pressured to stop evangelizing and to limit their activities to their own church premises.

Persecution of Christians, more severe in the past, is slowly changing. While Christian persecution in the past included beatings, imprisonment and sometimes murder, now it is generally more subtle. It continues in the form of harassment, strict surveillance and discrimination, including occasional imprisonment of leaders. All believers are monitored and all church services are infiltrated by spies; Christians are threatened and suffer discrimination in school and at work.

There were no reports of persons imprisoned or detained for specifically religious reasons. According to the International Religious Freedom Report, a few religious groups reported cases of members who alleged that the government targeted them for prosecution of crimes they did not commit because of their religious activities. Several pastors and Christians share stories about being put under scrutiny, pressured to stop evangelizing and told to limit their activities to their own church premises. Many house churches are not registered and therefore have no legal status whatsoever. In one area in particular, Christians are put under more pressure than elsewhere in Cuba: the area of Varadero. It is an area specifically meant for tourists. Only Cubans that work there are allowed to live there but Christians are repeatedly told not to do anything "Christian." It is specifically forbidden to do anything for youth; it's considered to be "infiltration of the wrong ideology," according to one pastor. The Cuban government is really keen on keeping the area clean and comfortable for the thousands of tourists coming to Varadero.

On the WWL, Cuba remained ranked number 41. The situation of Christians remains unchanged and will probably stay the same while the communist regime is in place; no transition is expected soon. Many religious organizations reported a significant increase in membership as well as revival, especially among the young. It's a sign of hope.

42. BELARUS

Belarus is often considered the last surviving dictatorship in Europe. The country is ruled by Alexander Lukashenko, an authoritarian who has been in power since 1994. His government allows almost no room for any opposing group, especially political opposition. After the 2010 presidential election, human rights, including freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, have repeatedly been violated.

Although the constitution provides for the equality of religions and denominations, the Orthodox Church is the only officially recognized denomination (80-85% of all Christians in Belarus), while the Catholic and Lutheran churches are merely tolerated. Church registration in Belarus is difficult, if not impossible. In practice, it is forbidden to carry out any religious activity without prior government recognition of the religious organization as a legal entity. The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations (2002) makes unregistered religious activity a criminal offense and may result in a two-year term of imprisonment or heavy court-imposed fines.

Religious communities do not have the right to develop their own media, to establish religious educational institutions, to train religious personnel, nor to invite foreign priests to satisfy religious needs of believers. Members of religious organizations do not have the right to share their religious convictions or to carry out any religious activity (to preach, to distribute literature, to hold public worship services, etc.), beyond the borders of the location where the community is registered.

Protestant and Catholic denominations are restricted in their activity and monitored by the secret police. Because the numbers of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians are growing, persecution is getting more intense for them.

Violent raids of unregistered churches occur frequently. In March 2010, twice a pastor was fined more than a month's average wages for leading an unregistered church following a raid on his church's worship service. In July 2010, a pastor was fined three times in one day for sharing his faith in a local village.

Several leaders of the Belarusian Christian Democratic party have been harassed and even imprisoned for long periods of time. Two of them were sentenced to labor camp, but were later freed. One of the youth leaders of the party, Dzmitry Dashkevich, was kept in inhumane conditions in prison and even tortured through deprivation of sleep, food and constant psychological assault.

The very restrictive religious laws will continue to be used as an instrument of the government to oppress religious minorities in the country. A change still is not in sight.

43. INDONESIA

The situation for Christians in Indonesia has deteriorated considerably. Believers are starting to face more and more hostility. Though the national authorities try to look neutral, in reality they are eager to win favor and support from Muslim parties, often even extremist parties. Until 2010 more than 50 regencies (a step lower than the provincial government) in 16 of the 33 provinces in Indonesia have passed sharia-inspired bylaws. Another source documents 151 sharia-inspired bylaws introduced in 24 provinces during the 1999-2009 period. These regulate the citizens' moral and religious life, e.g. concerning prostitution, gambling, alcohol consumption, pornography, Quran proficiency, and Muslim dress code.

The government's changing attitude is clearly shown in the treatment of the Indonesian Christian Church (GKI) Yasmin congregation in Bogor, West Java. Despite the Supreme Court's ruling in December 2010 to re-open the church, the mayor has told Home Affairs Minister Gamawan Fauzi that the church should not be built on a street with an Islamic name. Consequently, he has sealed off the church and forced all meetings to cease. The authorities did not enforce the Supreme Court's judgment, thus depriving the believers of their rights. Attacks against church buildings occurred regularly throughout 2010; in most cases the authorities did not investigate or charge those responsible. For the first time in the country's history, the Christian minority faced an attack by a suicide bomber. On September 25, a 31-year-old Muslim attacked the Bethel Injil Sepuluh Christian Church in Keputon, Solo, Java. Twenty-seven people were wounded, and the attacker was killed. Had he arrived a little earlier or chosen a different entrance, the casualty toll could have been much higher. On September 26, police found another similar bomb outside the Maranatha church in Ambon city, on the island of Ambon. Several days before this took place, on September 11, Muslim and Christian gangs in Ambon attacked each other, leaving three dead and more than a dozen injured.

In the week leading up to Easter celebrations, police discovered five bombs buried under a gas pipeline near a Catholic church in Serpong, near Jakarta. The bombs were due to explode on Good Friday and were successfully defused.

The Jakarta-based Setara Institute on peace and dialogue reported 99 incidents of violence and conflicts as of July 2011, a considerable rise compared to the 99 cases reported in whole year 2010. Muslim extremist groups continue to grow more and more hostile and violent towards Christians and are experiencing no resistance from national or local authorities. Muslim extremists have also found an ally in the blasphemy law, which they use to legitimize their actions. Given such leniency, the future for the Christian minority seems to be getting increasingly difficult. This has caused the country to rise in the WWL ranking for 2012.

44. PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

The Palestinian Basic Law—which functions as a temporary constitution—states that the official religion is Islam and sharia (Islamic legislation) is a principle source of legislation. Officially, freedom of belief and worship are guaranteed, provided public order or public morals are not violated. The dynamics of Christian persecution in the Palestinian Territories are complex. It should be stressed that the situation in Gaza is different from the West Bank, both territories being effectively under different governments at present –though Hamas and Fatah are moving closer lately. However, the Palestinian Authority, that rules over these territories—which are not recognized as an independent nation—has an overall negative attitude towards Christians. Reports indicate that pressure against Christians is increasing, especially with regard to incidents against Muslim-background believers (MBB's). The situation in general is comparable to the one of the previous reporting period.

There are several groups of Christians in the Palestinian Territories: indigenous Christians (mostly from Palestinian or Arab background) and MBBs. For Palestinian/Arab Christians it is important to distinguish between political (because of their nationality) and religious persecution (because of their faith). In general, the population in the Palestinian Territories is getting more and more Islamic. The total number of Palestinian Christians has declined at an accelerating rate, largely due to emigration. Increasing influence of Islam is one of the reasons for Christian emigration, but there are other factors as well: economical reasons, the relevant ease for Christians to emigrate (they have finances to do so and speak English, have contacts/family in the West) and restrictions from the Israeli side. As such, Palestinian Christians find themselves persecuted from many different sides.

Numbering 40,000, Christians are a minority in this land under Islam authority. Indigenous Christians have the right to live and practice their religion, providing they don't try to evangelize the Muslims.

MBB's are discriminated by community and family when their faith is known. The state is failing in upholding and protecting the rights of individual Christians and in some cases they have to seek safety in flight to a so called 'safe house' somewhere else in the area. In Gaza, there is also oppression from radical Muslim groups that are active in the strip, which together with pressure from the Hamas government continues to force Christians to leave. On the West Bank, although there is no official persecution, Christians face some discrimination.

The total number of points for the Palestinian Territories increased compared to last year (31 versus 29.5), however the region continues to hold position 44. The main reason for this increase is the report of a honor killing. For security reasons, we cannot publish more details about this murder. Also, a Christian surgeon was attacked in February 2011 in Gaza. After the attack, in which he fortunately was not wounded, he started receiving threats warning him to refrain from "evangelistic activities." However he says he does not share about his faith.

The Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, asked the United Nations to recognize an independent Palestinian State on September 23. The Security Council is now considering the request, but the United States has already declared that it would veto the submission if it is brought to a vote. Meanwhile, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has granted the Palestinians full membership on October 31, 2011. These developments might stretch the relationship between Messianic believers and Palestinian Christians.

Expectations with regards to the future vary. Some observers do not expect any repercussions from the revolts in the Arab world since the population in for instance Gaza is quite happy with Hamas. Others suspect increasing influence from Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt will have its consequences in the Palestinian Areas as well, especially resulting in increasing pressure for Christians.

45. KAZAKHSTAN

Kazakhstan is a member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and was its president in 2010. In order to make a good impression, the authorities in Kazakhstan suspended a planned new law on religion which would have particularly harmed religious groups, both Muslim and Christian, but of course also the smaller ones such as Jehovah Witnesses. Because of this suspension the country dropped out of the WWL, ranking 52 last year. Observers from several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) warned that the country would pick up its planned law once the government was out of the international focus again. These voices proved to be right as in September 2011, two laws were passed by parliament, which further imposed restrictions on religious rights, and which became effective in October 2011. Their titling show what they are aiming at: "The Law on Religious Activity and Religious Associations," the other one is an accumulating law changing nine other laws touching upon religion. It is significant that the term "freedom" does not appear in the titles, compared to its predecessor in 1992. No public discussions were allowed and the government ignored all warnings from outside, including from the OSCE. Regardless of this neglect of a befriended organization, the Council of Europe has invited the country to become a full member of the "Commission for Democracy through Law", better known as "Venice Commission." The laws seem to be aiming at curtailing extremist Islam (which has off late begun to carry out attacks), but unregistered Christian churches come under attack, too. Bigger churches, like the Russian Orthodox Church, seem to be less affected.

In connection with processing the new laws, the president stated: "We have to bring order to our house. I believe you (the parliament) will approach this question seriously and we will all do what needs to be done." As in other Central Asian states, the laws require the re-registration of all religious communities—an impossible hurdle for several smaller Christian communities. The system with four levels of registration is very complicated; the process will be bureaucratic and cumbersome. Unregistered religious activity is banned. Leading, participating in or financing unregistered groups is a punishable offense. This has a great impact on those Christian groups that refuse to register (like the Council of Baptist Churches), or those who do not pass the requirements of the new registration procedure. The new amendments in the law will impose stiff punishment on people who are involved in any way in such groups.

The different regulations are too numerous to list here. Every thinkable aspect of religious life will be restricted: all materials face censorship, new places of worship need approval from local and national government offices, founders of religious communities must be Kazakh citizens, and work among the youth will definitely become more problematic.

The boost of 8.5 points in the WWL ranking was caused not only by the very harsh regulations of the new laws. The government is determined to tackle all kinds of religion it considers as extremist, including Christianity. Churches are thus likely to face serious consequences as they are a minority and therefore easy targets. First signs coming in after the reporting period show that tough times are ahead for believers: invited pastors are hindered to join conferences, first drafts outline the upcoming censorship of religious literature and objects and Christian and other groups are asked to report on a daily basis on their measures against religious extremism. If it follows this path, the country will likely increase in ranking among the Central Asian countries on the WWL.

46. BAHRAIN

“Unless all sides of the conflict agree to an inclusive dialogue in order to reach meaningful reform, Bahrain is heading for prolonged and costly political stalemate,” analyzes the International Crisis Group in its July 28, 2011, country brief. Bahrain, where the majority Shiite population is demonstrating against the Sunni government, is the scene of a hegemony competition between Saudi Arabia, who sent its troops in support of the Bahraini government in order to extinguish the spark of revolution coming from the Arab Spring, and Iran, whose reaction up until now was limited to threatening rhetoric.

The Bahraini constitution declares that the religion of the State is Islam and that ‘the State guarantees the inviolability of worship, and the freedom to perform religious rites and hold religious parades and meetings in accordance with the customs observed in the country.’ Sharia (Islamic law) is a principal source for legislation.

This mainly Shia-Islamic country is quite tolerant in general because of its international position in banking and trade. There are two Christian bookshops and several Christian hospitals. A considerable number of expatriate Christians (mainly from South Asia) work and live in Bahrain and are relatively free to practice their faith in private places of worship, but proselytizing Muslims is illegal. While the number of compounds is limited, dozens of congregations must use the same building. They are not allowed to advertise their services in Arabic, but they can in English.

Traditionally, society is not tolerant towards converts from Islam to other religious groups. Families and communities often banned them and sometimes subjected converts to physical abuse. Muslim-background believers generally do not dare to talk about their conversion and some of them believed it necessary to leave the country permanently. Pressure comes mostly from family and community, to a lesser extent from the state. Government persecution may have decreased in general as they are preoccupied by remaining stability and crushing protests.

Bahrain holds position 46 in this year’s list, versus 45 last year. At the same time, the total number of points increases slightly (from 28.5 to 31). The descent is explained by the rise in points of other countries on the list. The reason for the increase of points is that we received more information about the lack of freedom for Muslims who want to change faith. Since the constitution declares Islam to be the state religion and Islamic law as an important source of legislation, it implies that Muslims are forbidden to change faith. MBBs are still considered Muslims by the state and a legal challenge to this was not permitted.

In terms of religious freedom for Christians, Bahrain remains one of the most liberal countries of the Arabian Peninsula.

47. COLOMBIA

Colombia is a country with multiple realities. Formally, Colombia is a modern democratic country where the rule of law is established and religious freedom is guaranteed. However, large areas of the country are under the control of criminal organizations, drug cartels, revolutionaries and paramilitary groups. The two consecutive governments of President Álvaro Uribe were quite successful in weakening the influence of these groups, but these efforts did not succeed in completely neutralizing their activities, which continue to threaten national security. Open Doors' research has revealed that criminal organizations are specifically targeting Christians, and for this reason Colombia enters the WWL again.

Persecution of Christians, particularly by criminal organizations, is generally motivated by a combination of two elements. Organized crime views Christians who openly oppose their activities as a threat, especially when Christians get involved in social programs or in politics. In addition, they know the Christian faith is not compatible with their ideals. They fear Christians will influence members of the community or even members of their own organizations to oppose their activities.

In its 2010 report, the Christian NGO Justapaz counts 95 death threats or attempted murders, 71 forced displacements, 17 homicides, 2 disappearances and many cases of beatings, torture, kidnapping, and forced recruitment that specifically targets Christians. According to this information, criminal organizations are responsible for close to 90% of these incidents. Our reports counted a total 5 cases of Christians that were martyred in 2011, but the real numbers are probably much higher because of the ongoing armed conflict in the country. In February, a pastor and two of his relatives were killed in the town of Dibulla, Guajira by rightwing rebel groups in retaliation for the growing number of believers and to stop fasting and prayer meetings. On March 5, Pastor George Ponton of the Evangelical Christian Church of Colombia in the Cauca department was poisoned by indigenous leaders. Two missionaries working for the World Missionary Movement Church were killed in September by illegal militias.

In Colombia, probably the most persecution suffered by the rural Christian indigenous population (no reliable numbers available) comes from the alliances that exist between "pagan" (non-Christian) indigenous populations and paramilitary groups. These pagan indigenous populations receive material support from paramilitary organizations to persecute indigenous Christians. Paramilitary organizations (FARC and others) mislead these indigenous groups, telling them that their Christian brothers are a threat to their culture and traditions. In fact, the FARC uses indigenous populations as an advance army to terrorize the indigenous Christians.

Indigenous territories in Colombia are protected by a national law that gives them autonomy. Because of this autonomy, government security forces (police and military) are not allowed to enter these territories. The indigenous territories are administrated by indigenous organizations, but these are so weak that they are being infiltrated by guerrillas. Because there is virtually no government presence nor enforcement of the rule of law, these territories have become a safe haven for the guerrillas drug trafficking activities. This situation contributes to the persecution of Christians.

In Colombia, the security situation continues to improve due to the capture of two FARC high commanders in 2009 and another earlier this year. However, violence in Colombia is structural and in areas where the government has lost control of public security, drug cartels and illegal armed groups continue to operate with impunity. Christians will continue to be targeted for persecution because of their presence as an alternative pillar of society and their witness through their involvement in social and political activities.

48. KYRGYZSTAN

The decrease in rank this year doesn't mean that the situation of the Christian minority has improved. This is clearly shown by the fact that it even increased slightly in points. But as there are three newcomers on the list overtaking it and the considerable deterioration of persecution in Indonesia has to be kept in mind, Kyrgyzstan slid down the list.

The country lived through a troublesome political time as its old regime was toppled, giving the interim government the difficult task of shaping future change. Though Kyrgyzstan is still in a transitional period, the first truly democratic elections in the whole Central Asian region were carried out at the end of October 2011. There were some irregularities but the elections remained peaceful and brought a new president into office. Whether these changes will bring the Christian minority relief is another question. The new president has already announced that he will concentrate on uniting the country. Recalling the violent ethnic clashes with the Uzbek community in the south of Kyrgyzstan back in 2010, without doubt this is important for the country. But this idea is somewhat flawed as in other Asian and Central Asian states policies focusing on unity and social harmony are used for harassing and harming minorities including Christians. It is possible that Christians may come under similar pressure in Kyrgyzstan.

The strict laws on religion introduced in 2009 are still in force. Conversion to Christianity is not allowed which makes life for the small number of MBBs difficult. As in other Central Asian countries, the laws distinguish between registered and unregistered communities, while creating almost insurmountable hurdles for the Christian churches to get registration—bigger churches like the Russian Orthodox Church are less affected. Literature and other materials are censored and Christian education for children even for registered communities is limited. Believers face being physically harmed and attacked and their meeting places and homes also come under attack. MBBs receive pressure from family, friends and neighborhood. There are also reports that Christians are monitored not only by the state, but also by Islamic clergy and mahalla (“neighborhood”) committees.

Kyrgyzstan is at a turning-point in its history. The first free and fair elections have given the opportunity to grant minorities legal standing, be they ethnic or religious minorities. However, the public attitude in society points rather to ongoing discrimination, combined with disregard for believers' freedom by government.

49. BANGLADESH

In the World Watch List 2012, Bangladesh dropped three places although the persecution situation remains essentially unchanged (even the points remained the same).

On June 20, 2011, the government of Bangladesh decided to retain Islam as the state religion. The government is proposing amendments to its constitution, but says the proposed changes won't affect the legal system. Inheritance and other family laws are already based on religion. The new proposals seek to restore certain aspects of secularism, but for the Christian minority, little change is expected.

In general, believers have freedom to live according to their faith, but they have to be careful, particularly when including Muslims who have converted to the Christian faith. Local authorities and the Muslim majority may disturb church meetings or put believers under pressure. There are also reports of Christians being physically harmed and homes, or meeting places, attacked. On the other hand, believers who stood trial in August were exonerated by the court; they had been accused of "hurting religious sensibility" while organizing a health camp. Another believer was also exonerated for distributing Christian literature near a major Muslim gathering in March.

Though the hostile attitude of family, society and government is not so obvious as in other Muslim countries and the influence of extremist Islam is low-profile, the outlook for the Christian minority is mixed.

50. MALAYSIA

Malaysia increased considerably with 4.5 points, making it again on this year's World Watch List. Conversion is only allowed for non-Malay citizens. For three quarters of society, who are Malay, conversion is therefore illegal. In five states, it is a criminal offense which can be punished by a fine or even a jail term. The growing hostility towards believers is probably shown best by the following two events: Islamic authorities unlawfully entered a church on August 3, 2011 and harassed guests at a community dinner. At least 20 officers from the central Selangor state's Islamic Affairs Department and police entered a Methodist church's hall without a warrant and took photographs and videos of a dinner attended by more than 100 people. According to a statement distributed by Malaysia's main church confederation, the officers claimed to have received an unspecified complaint and recorded details of several Muslims at the dinner. Malaysian law restricts conversion of Malay Muslims to other religions. This incident resulted in rumors about a Christian plan to convert the whole country. This was debated publically and resulted in a rally of 5,000 demonstrators against the Christian minority. Although this number was far less than the organizers had expected, the youth organizations of several parties represented in parliament took part in the demonstrations.

The second event showing the changed attitude towards Christians was the Prime Minister's announcement on September 16, 2011 that there was to be a "comprehensive review" of the Publications and Printing Presses Act. Shortly afterwards, the Malaysian government announced that Malay-language Bibles could be printed locally. Idris Jala of the Prime Minister's Department promised that there would be no restrictions on Malay-language Bibles in Sabah and Sarawak states on Borneo. Jala however cautioned that the books that were imported or printed in the West Coast (Peninsular Malaysia) must carry the words "Christian publication" and bear the sign of the cross on its front cover. The statement was seen as a government compromise to soothe the anger of the Christian community over seized shipments of Christian literature. This all goes to show that freedom for the Christian minority is deteriorating. This is also supported by the fact that there have been more reports of MBBs facing arrests and physical assaults.

All these incidents show that Malay believers face increasing hostility by government and Islamic fundamentalists while established churches are under threat.



ISLAMIC EXTREMISM THE MAIN PERSECUTOR OF CHRISTIANS IN 2011

The 2012 Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) has a familiar look to it, with North Korea topping the List for the tenth time in succession as the country where Christians face the severest persecution. Islamic majority countries are represented most heavily on the list, however, providing nine of the top ten, and thirty-eight out of the top fifty. Afghanistan (2), Saudi Arabia (3), Somalia (4), Iran (5), and the Maldives (6) form a block where indigenous Christians have almost no freedom to believe at all. For the first time Pakistan (10) entered the top ten after a tumultuous year when the highest ranking Christian in the land, Cabinet Minister Shahbaz Bhatti, was assassinated on March 2nd, 2011 for his attempts to change the blasphemy law. The rest of the top ten is comprised of Iraq (9), Yemen (8) and Uzbekistan (7)—the central Asian republic that fines, raids, and jails unregistered Christians.

The largest risers on the 2012 WWL are three countries—Nigeria (13), up from 23, Egypt (15) up from 19, and Sudan (16), up from 35. In all three cases, increased Islamic extremism is the culprit. Nigeria continues to be the country where the worst atrocities in terms of loss of life occur, with over 300 Christians losing their lives this year, though the true number is thought to be far higher. Since 2009 over fifty churches and ten pastors have been killed by an extreme Islamic group called Boko Haram, literally translated as “western learning is forbidden.” This group became increasingly more violent across the reporting period. After the election of a Christian President in April, extremists went on the rampage and slaughtered 170 Christians. Some of the states in northern Nigeria have adopted sharia law in recent years which causes greater tension with the local Christians, as they now feel they have a second class status.

Two countries re-entered the recent WWL—Kazakhstan (45), and Colombia (47). The huge central Asian republic elevated itself into the WWL thanks significantly to the passage of an invasive and restrictive religion law, which requires the re-registration of all religious communities, and will virtually make youth work illegal and put all religious acts under the eyes of the government. Unfortunately, Kazakhstan is merely following the path already trod by its central Asian neighbours. Colombia was virtually a permanent member of the WWL previously, particularly with the left wing insurgency movements such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), or the National Liberation Army (ELN), as well as paramilitary groups targeting Christian pastors. These movements have branched into narco-trafficking, and Christian leaders that will not cooperate in the drug trade are targeted for assassination. Five were killed this year, and it is thought the number could be as high as twenty.

Despite or perhaps because of these rising trends, the Church of Jesus Christ in most of the world overcomes. As a pastor in a Gulf state confided, “When we suffer, we bring a credibility to the gospel that cannot be ignored, because we show that Christ is worth it, and that is the secret of growth under persecution.”