



LAOS: Country Dossier

May 2018



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

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research@od.org

www.opendoorsanalytical.org

World Watch List 2018

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2017	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2016	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2015	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2014
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.6	94	92	92	92	90
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	89	88	81	78
3	Somalia	16.0	16.2	16.1	16.3	16.4	10.4	91	91	87	90	80
4	Sudan	14.2	14.5	14.3	15.6	16.0	12.0	87	87	84	80	73
5	Pakistan	14.4	13.5	13.8	15.0	13.1	16.7	86	88	87	79	77
6	Eritrea	15.2	14.5	15.8	16.1	15.2	9.4	86	82	89	79	72
7	Libya	15.2	15.3	14.2	15.7	15.5	10.4	86	78	79	76	71
8	Iraq	14.7	14.7	14.9	14.9	15.1	11.3	86	86	90	86	78
9	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.4	16.5	16.7	2.6	85	85	78	73	74
10	Iran	14.0	14.1	14.5	15.8	16.4	10.0	85	85	83	80	77
11	India	12.6	12.7	13.2	14.7	12.9	14.4	81	73	68	62	55
12	Saudi Arabia	14.9	13.7	14.2	15.5	16.4	4.1	79	76	76	77	78
13	Maldives	15.2	15.5	13.5	15.8	16.7	1.1	78	76	76	78	77
14	Nigeria	11.8	11.5	13.1	12.1	12.1	16.5	77	78	78	78	70
15	Syria	14.4	14.3	14.1	14.5	14.7	3.7	76	86	87	83	79
16	Uzbekistan	15.5	12.1	13.0	13.1	16.0	3.5	73	71	70	69	68
17	Egypt	11.3	12.8	12.2	11.7	9.5	12.4	70	65	64	61	61
18	Vietnam	12.4	8.4	12.7	14.2	13.8	7.4	69	71	66	68	65
19	Turkmenistan	15.2	10.3	12.9	12.8	15.2	1.9	68	67	66	63	62
20	Laos	12.9	8.6	13.6	13.9	14.9	3.5	67	64	58	58	62
21	Jordan	13.2	13.3	11.5	10.9	13.0	4.3	66	63	59	56	56
22	Tajikistan	13.3	11.3	11.8	11.8	12.9	4.3	65	58	58	50	47
23	Malaysia	12.0	14.9	12.8	12.4	9.3	3.9	65	60	58	55	49
24	Myanmar	11.6	11.1	13.2	10.4	11.0	7.8	65	62	62	60	59
25	Nepal	12.6	11.9	10.7	11.5	12.4	4.6	64		(not in WWL)		
26	Brunei	14.3	14.2	10.7	10.2	13.5	0.9	64	64	61	58	57
27	Qatar	13.4	12.9	11.7	11.3	14.1	0.0	63	66	65	64	63
28	Kazakhstan	12.8	10.0	10.2	12.2	13.7	3.7	63	56	55	51	49
29	Ethiopia	9.8	10.0	10.8	10.9	10.5	10.4	62	64	67	61	65
30	Tunisia	11.9	13.2	10.6	10.7	12.0	3.9	62	61	58	55	55
31	Turkey	12.5	9.7	9.8	11.7	9.6	8.7	62	57	55	52	(not in WWL)
32	Kenya	12.0	10.9	10.0	7.9	11.7	9.4	62	68	68	63	48
33	Bhutan	11.9	11.6	12.4	11.4	13.1	1.1	62	61	56	56	54
34	Kuwait	13.4	12.6	11.6	10.9	12.3	0.4	61	57	56	49	50
35	Central African Republic	9.0	8.1	10.1	8.9	8.8	16.1	61	58	59	67	67
36	Palestinian Territories	12.1	12.8	10.7	10.5	12.6	1.1	60	64	62	58	53
37	Mali	11.4	9.6	11.2	8.1	9.2	9.6	59	59	55	52	54
38	Indonesia	10.3	11.0	11.5	10.0	9.3	6.9	59	55	55	50	46
39	Mexico	8.3	7.6	12.1	10.7	9.7	10.4	59	57	56	55	(not in WWL)
40	United Arab Emirates	13.6	12.2	10.0	10.4	11.8	0.2	58	55	55	49	51
41	Bangladesh	10.4	8.8	11.4	9.6	7.5	10.0	58	63	57	51	46
42	Algeria	12.3	13.1	7.5	10.4	12.4	2.0	58	58	56	55	54
43	China	9.2	7.2	8.0	10.7	13.3	9.1	57	57	57	57	51
44	Sri Lanka	11.1	7.6	10.5	11.3	10.1	6.9	57	55	(not in WWL)	51	55
45	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.1	9.3	11.1	12.4	2.4	57	(not in WWL)	57	50	(not in WWL)
46	Oman	12.1	12.2	9.9	9.4	12.6	1.1	57	53	53	55	56
47	Mauritania	11.5	11.3	11.1	12.2	11.0	0.0	57	55	(not in WWL)	50	51
48	Bahrain	12.9	13.1	10.2	9.9	10.3	0.2	57	54	54	(not in WWL)	48
49	Colombia	7.9	7.6	11.9	8.6	8.5	11.9	56	53	55	55	56
50	Djibouti	12.2	12.2	10.3	9.9	11.7	0.0	56	57	58	60	46

WWL 2018 Persecution Watch Countries¹

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
51	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.4	13.9	0.4	56
52	Kyrgyzstan	11.7	9.5	10.0	8.1	11.6	2.8	54
53	Tanzania	10.1	10.3	10.1	9.5	9.0	3.9	53
54	Russian Federation	11.1	8.4	10.1	8.9	10.7	2.0	51
55	Morocco	10.4	11.5	7.6	8.8	12.0	0.6	51
56	Cuba	8.5	4.9	10.7	10.4	12.2	2.4	49
57	Uganda	10.9	8.7	9.5	8.7	4.8	3.9	46
58	Niger	9.9	9.7	9.0	7.0	7.1	2.6	45

¹ These countries reached a score of 41 points or more but did not receive enough points to be included in the WWL Top 50.

LAOS – Country Dossier (May 2018)

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Introduction

This country report is a collation of documents based around [Open Doors World Watch List \(WWL\)](#)¹ including statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations, and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database ([WCD](#))². Further news and analysis is supplied by [World Watch Monitor](#)³ and WWR staff.

LAOS		
World Watch List	Score	Rank
WWL 2018	67	20
WWL 2017	64	24
WWL 2016	58	29
WWL 2015	58	28
WWL 2014	62	21

¹ See: <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/>

² WCD website: <http://www.brill.com/publications/online-resources/world-christian-database>

³ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

WWL 2018: Keys to understanding LAOS

Link for general background information:

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

Recent country history

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

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

The religious landscape

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

Laos is one of the few Theravada Buddhist countries in the world, following the oldest still existing Buddhist tradition. But how does this ancient faith system fit in with the national leadership's Communist ideology? There is a close connection between society and the influence of Buddhism, temples and monks. Buddhist temples are centers of communal life, especially in rural areas, and most Buddhist men spend some time of their lives in a temple – ranging from a few days to longer periods of time. The religious goals of some Buddhist monks overlap with the political goals of the Communist party, namely to keep control of the country. The Communists' main goal is to preserve stability in the country and to keep the government secure. The predominant goal of many Buddhist monks is to preserve their respected role in society and to maintain their monopoly in religious matters and in political influence. This desire for preservation of power and position presents a lot of common ground for both sides.

The political landscape

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

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

The socio-economic landscape

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

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

Traditional Lao culture (Buddhism) perceives it to be natural for wealth and power to be concentrated in the hands of the ruling elite by virtue of their karma. This karma determines their birth and social status. The means to improve your own status is to build up a network

based on obligation and loyalty, given in exchange for protection and assistance in times of need. Given these underlying social values, there is little possibility of improvements being made in undeveloped regions or even of an open protest; after all, what happens is determined by one's karma and has to be accepted.

Concluding remarks

Laos is dependent on its larger neighbors Vietnam and China. As a land-locked country, it needs access to the sea and relies particularly on China for major infrastructure projects. This dependence has several implications:

- 1) For the country's economy it means that the government can only partly influence major decisions.
- 2) For the political future (i.e. concerning civil rights and freedom of religion), it means that Laos is unlikely to open up for religious minorities anytime soon.
- 3) After the country's chairmanship of ASEAN, Laos will be ignored again by international observers and the plight of persecuted Christians in Laos is likely to continue largely unnoticed.

WWL 2018: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
7,038,000	225,000	3.2

Source: WCD, May 2017

How did Christians get there?

Roman Catholic missionaries (Jesuits from Vietnam) made several attempts to enter Laotian territory from 1630 onwards. However, not until the Paris Foreign Mission Society entered the country in 1878, could a mission station at Ban Dorn Don (an island in the Mekong River) be established.⁴

Presbyterian Christians established churches in Thailand (Siam) in the 1860s and Swedish and Swiss missionaries moved eastwards into Laos in 1890 and 1902 respectively.⁵ However, Protestantism did not spread until the Christian and Missionary Alliance entered Laos in 1948. The Khmer minority, dominated by the Lao majority, then began to respond positively as did other minority groups.

⁴ See <http://directory.ucaNews.com/country/laos/18>, last accessed 30 September 2016.

⁵ See <https://laoevangelicalchurch.com/lec-history/>, last accessed 30 September 2016.

What church networks exist today? ⁶

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist
-	44,900	178,000	1,800	84	-	176,000	21,800

Source: WCD, May 2017

The Roman Catholic Church is present in the most populous five central and southern provinces and is generally able to work undisturbed. In April 2010 the official ordination of a Lao Catholic bishop took place, and in May 2017 the first Laotian cardinal was announced. The Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) is officially recognized and consists of about 400 churches with around 100,000 believers.

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

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

Religious context (selection)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others ⁷
225,000	8,100	5,500	3,740,000	2,924,000	-	15,800	93,200

Also to note: Chinese folk: 25,300

Source: WCD, May 2017

According to WCD statistics, 51.3% of the population are Buddhist, mainly following the Theravada teachings. 41.5% adhere to ethnic religions (Chinese folk not included), basically related to their ethnic or tribal ancestry, and are similar to religions practiced in Thailand. Several folk traditions have been incorporated into Buddhism, so that the numbers given above should be understood as overlapping. Folk traditions for example venerate special places like rivers or trees, natural phenomena and include ancestral worship.

⁶ **Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelicals:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalists:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal movements.

⁷ This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.

Notes on the current situation

- In the mid-1970s, the Communist regime started a campaign against the Christian minority to eradicate them from Laos, but failed. Despite this, the church is thriving and persecution does not stop believers from following Christ.
- In general, there is more freedom of worship for Christians in urban areas than in rural areas. In rural areas Christians always run the risk of being disturbed, harassed or even imprisoned by local authorities, often stirred up by other religious leaders. In larger cities Christians can find more room for activities as long as they do not disturb the peace. There are also reports of Christians from the ethnic minorities being expelled by their communities and forced to live in the jungle, where they often stay months or years and finally have to relocate.
- There is still a great need for Christian literature and Bibles in minority languages. For instance: 50% of the total Christian population is from the Khmu tribe and they still do not have a Bible in their own language.
- In its 2017 annual report, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom again put Laos on its Tier 2 list of countries.⁸

WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 67 / Position: 20

WWL 2017 Points: 64 / Position: 24

WWL 2016 Points: 58 / Position: 29

Where persecution comes from

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

⁸ Tier 2 countries are selected for close monitoring due to the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by the government concerned: See http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF_Tier2_Laos.pdf, last accessed 31 July 2017.

How Christians are suffering

The Communist authorities heavily monitor all religious activities and control them, including those of the registered church. As all gatherings have to be notified to the administration, house churches have to operate clandestinely as they are considered “illegal gatherings”.

Converts to Christianity bear the brunt of persecution. They are considered as putting themselves outside the (Buddhist-animist) community and are consequently persecuted by their own (extended, as a Laotian household usually is composed of three generations being under one roof) family and by local authorities, often stirring up the community or using local religious leaders.

Examples

In August 2016, Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith issued a new regulation: Decree 315 on the Management and Protection of Religious Activities. Decree 315 defines the Government's role as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities. Decree 315 replaces Decree 92 on religious practice. The government issued an update in the WWL 2018 reporting period which will bring even more restrictions and trouble for Christians. As a direct result of this update, Christians in Luang Prabang Province have received more pressure from police to stop holding meetings. The new law requires a registered place of worship that is owned by the church and a registered minister in order to be considered legal. However, this is almost impossible to accomplish. First, nobody is keen to sell land to a church. Secondly, the new law states that the construction of churches needs to be approved by the prime minister.

There have been several cases where Christians endured expulsions from their communities in the WWL 2018 reporting period. Reports that there have been churches of the Hmong minority destroyed could not be confirmed and were therefore not considered in the scoring. One house of a Christian believer was targeted by an arson attack in January 2017. At least two Laotian Christians were detained for several days by the police in Xaisomboun Province in March 2017. And there were reports of more Hmong Christians being detained and arrested.

WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 67 / Position: 20

WWL 2017 Points: 64 / Position: 24

WWL 2016 Points: 58 / Position: 29

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Position on World Watch List (WWL)

The WWL 2018 score for Laos showed an increase of three points. Compared to WWL 2017, the scores for Laos increased in all *Spheres of life*, particularly in the *Private, Family and Community spheres of life*. This reflects an increased pressure on converts from family, friends, neighbors and the local authorities. The rise is also partly due to more reports being available concerning Christians among the country’s ethnic minorities. The score for violence decreased very slightly; persecution has never been very violent in Laos.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Laos ⁹	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	Not at all
Religious nationalism	Medium
Ethnic antagonism	Strong
Denominational protectionism	Medium
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Very strong
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	Not at all

⁹ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

Communist and post-Communist oppression (Very strong):

Laos is one of the five remaining Marxist-Leninist countries in the world, staunchly sticks to it and as such is strictly opposed to any influence deemed foreign or Western. In order to keep control, the Communist Party puts enormous pressure on society, including the small Christian minority. It has a negative view of Christians and considers them to be foreign agents and enemies. Christianity is seen as a Western ideology that challenges Communism. The Lao government controls all information, including newspapers and radio, effectively maintaining a tight control in the country.

Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong):

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

Ethnic antagonism (Strong):

Animism and other tribal practices are observed in tribal villages, especially in rural areas (which make up at least sixty percent of the country’s territory). Abandoning tribal practices for Christian faith is seen as betrayal. Village leaders and family members see it necessary to expel Christians from their communities because of their fear that this foreign faith will anger the guardian spirits. Local officials are also known to force Christians to renounce their faith and village leaders sometimes summon the local authorities to arrest Christians.

Religious nationalism (Medium):

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

Denominational protectionism (Medium):

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

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Laos	Level of influence
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Strong
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Medium
Violent religious groups	Not at all

Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Strong
Own (extended) family	Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Not at all
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

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

Context

Laos has been in the tight grip of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party since 1975. Its exclusive networks of party members’ families and close friends add to the pressure felt strongly by every citizen, but especially by minorities. The country lacks freedom of opinion, let alone a free press which could highlight the manifold cases of corruption. Any organized group, particularly if not in line with the ideology imposed by the government, is perceived as a threat to the preservation of Communism in the country. One of the latest signs of repression was when authorities [sentenced three Lao nationals](#)¹⁰ to prison terms of up to 18 years in May 2017, after they had held a protest in front of the Lao embassy in Thailand.

The country’s dependency on its giant neighbor China, especially as a land-locked country, hampers development and makes Laos vulnerable. China is by far the largest foreign investor in the country. However, growing environmental and social costs led authorities to intervene in the WWL 2018 reporting period, for example by [shutting down banana farms](#)¹¹ producing for China in seven provinces. Laotian girls continue to be [trafficked](#)¹² to China due to a lack of female spouses there.

There were no reports available on the persecution of other religions. However, Decree 315, implemented by the Laotian government (see “National sphere”), will have consequences for other religious groups like Buddhists or animists, and not just Christians.

¹⁰ See: <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Three-Laotian-workers-sentenced-to-12,-18-and-20-years-jail-for-criticizing-government-40758.html>, last accessed 5 September 2017.

¹¹ See: <http://thediplomat.com/2017/04/whats-behind-the-china-banana-ban-in-laos/>, last accessed 5 September 2017.

¹² See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/chinese-marriage-proposals-02132017122352.html>, last accessed 5 September 2017.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

Such communities do not mix with local churches, they include communities of diplomatic staff and are facing pressure, for example, through the police monitoring system.

Historical Christian communities:

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

Communities of converts to Christianity:

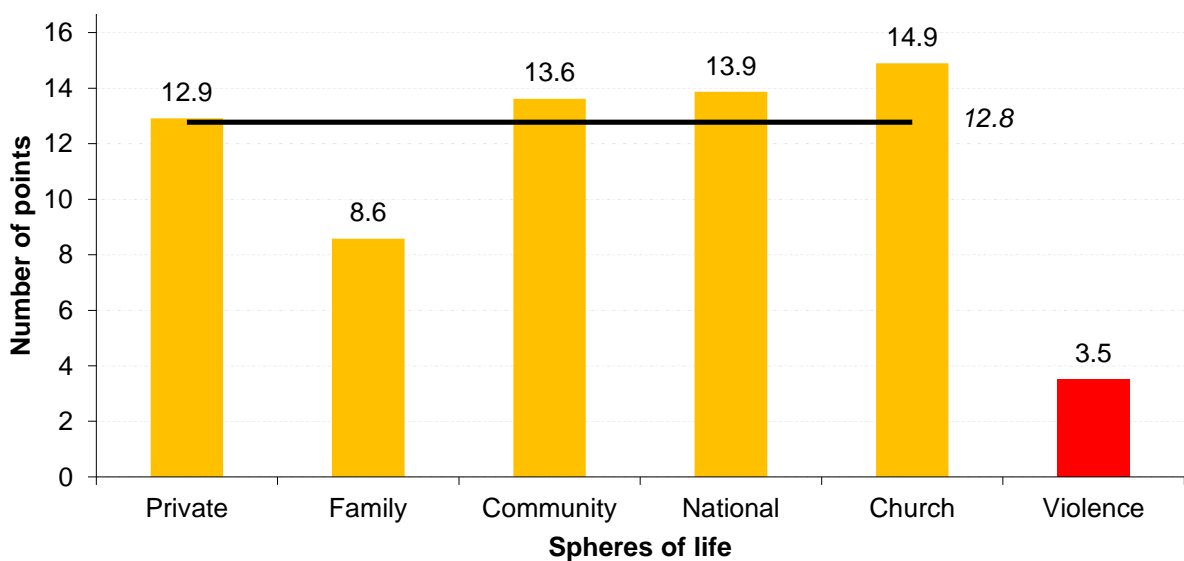
Converts come from a Buddhist or Ethnic-animist background and are facing the strongest persecution both from local authorities and from families, friends and neighbors. Since every conversion is an indication that Christianity is growing, the government is wary of conversions as well.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations, Methodists, Lutherans, Assemblies of God and many other denominations exist in Laos. As the government does not allow “illegal” gatherings, all these groups need to register under one of the three government-recognized churches mentioned above. Congregations that do not, have to meet clandestinely. Members of those churches also face discrimination at various levels of society.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Laos



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The WWL 2018 Persecution pattern for Laos shows:

- The average pressure on Christians over all *Spheres of life* is at a very high level, rising from a score of 12.1 in WWL 2017 to 12.8 in WWL 2018.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Church, National* and *Community spheres*. Pressure on converts is especially acute in the *Private* and *Community spheres*, while all Christians face growing pressure in the *National* and *Church spheres*. This pressure is a result of the authorities re-emphasizing Communist values and trying to keep the number of conversions down. It also reflects the government's effort to stay in power and fight all forces perceived as alien.
- The increase in pressure corresponded with a slight growth in the level of violence against Christians: The violence score increased from 3.1 (in WWL 2017) to 3.5 in WWL 2018.

Private sphere:

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

Family sphere:

Family records are sometimes confiscated from Christians which make the registration of all family events (births, weddings, deaths) impossible. In strongly Buddhist areas, weddings and burials have been hindered (in one instance a body was even taken away by the authorities), and baptisms have had to be carried out with the utmost caution. Buddhist teachings are often considered part of Lao "cultural education" and are therefore part of the curriculum in school. In one reported case, Christian students were required to attend an actual Buddhist temple ritual which was against their Christian faith. Children of Christian families have even been denied admittance at some schools because of their faith. Two common things families use to put pressure on converts is the threat of divorce (if married) and the loss of inheritance rights.

Community sphere:

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

Christians are seen as divergent to the norm. Families that were expelled from villages said they had neighbors that wanted to convert but were hesitant since they saw Christianity to be disadvantageous to their lives in the community. Communist leaders also fear the spread of Christianity and refer to it as a Western ideology which weakens the nation. This negative view towards Christians leads to delays in assistance, threats and restrictions from both the community and local authorities. Christians often face limitations in the use of community resources. In one case, a pregnant Christian woman was denied access to a hospital to give birth. In the WWL 2018 reporting period, there have been cases of Christians being denied employment for faith reasons and Christian business owners have been discriminated against. Local authorities also fine Christians for illegal meetings. In one case, nine Christian families, a total of 38 people, were fined 800,000 kip (\$100 USD) by their village authorities. They had the choice of paying the fine or renouncing their faith, with the threat of unbearable pressure if they refused. Apart from such fines, the authorities have also been known to put pressure on families to sacrifice a pig to appease the spirits.

National sphere:

Article 9 of the 2003 amended Constitution states the duty of the State to respect and protect all religion, particularly mentioning Buddhists and monks, while Article 43 says that Lao citizens have the right and freedom to believe or not to believe in any religion. However, since the promulgation of Decree 92 in 2002, those broad provisions on religious practices have been abused to make the true exercise of religious freedom more difficult. This Decree demands the government's prior consent for any religious activity: Without this consent any activity is considered illegal. Conversion to a new faith, preaching, and conducting church activities all require government permission. Based on the experience of Christian leaders, the government hardly ever gives permission.

In August 2016, Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith issued a new regulation: Decree 315 on the Management and Protection of Religious Activities. Decree 315 defines the Government's role as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities. Decree 315 replaces Decree 92 on

religious practice. The government issued an update in the WWL 2018 reporting period which will bring even more restrictions and trouble for Christians. As a direct result of this update, Christians in Luang Prabang Province have received more pressure from police to stop holding meetings. The new law requires a registered place of worship that is owned by the church and a registered minister in order to be considered legal. However, this is almost impossible to accomplish. First, nobody is keen to sell land to a church. Secondly, the new law states that the construction of churches needs to be approved by the prime minister.

Christianity is seen as an insult to the Buddhist faith which is embraced as being a central part of Lao culture and therefore of the nation's identity. But Christians are also accused by village leaders of angering spirits whenever there is widespread sickness in their village. They are frequently accused of unethical conversion and in the WWL 2018 reporting period, some were even detained for that reason. If perpetrators attack Christians or churches, they nearly always go unpunished. Christians cannot expect to receive fair treatment and justice from the police, authorities or courts. The media continues to present Christianity as a remnant of the colonial days and a source of anger for the spirits.

Church sphere:

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

Violence:

There have been several cases where Christians were expelled from their communities in the WWL 2018 reporting period. Reports that there have been churches of the Hmong minority destroyed could not be confirmed and were therefore not considered in the scoring. One house of a Christian believer was targeted by an arson attack in January 2017. At least two Laotian Christians were detained for several days by the police in Xaisomboun Province in March 2017. There were also reports of more Hmong Christians being detained and arrested.

Gender profile of persecution

Female/ Male: No data available.

Future outlook

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

No initiatives will be tolerated which cannot be controlled by the Communist authorities and this will remain true for the Christian minority well into the future and reflects the unbroken power of Lao's main persecution engine of *Communist and post-Communist oppression*. The authorities continue to come down very harshly on any perceived dissent and deviation (which includes Christian faith). On the other hand, Laos desperately needs development and economic growth. Therefore it may find itself in a catch-22 situation in the foreseeable future: Foreign investment needs increasing openness, otherwise the dependence on China will grow further.

Policy considerations

Currently under review.

WWR in-depth reports

No in-depth reports on Laos are currently available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

Open Doors article(s) from the region

There are currently no Open Doors articles on Laos available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

World Watch Monitor news articles

Up-to-date articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/laos/>

- [Laos government agrees to religious freedom education](#)
23 March 2018
The US-based Institute for Global Engagement (IGE) is to stage a series of seminars in Laos focusing on “religious freedom as a human right, Lao government policy on religious activity and encouraging dialogue between religious and government leaders in outlying provinces.
- [Pressure on Laos Christians continues with arson attack](#)
22 March 2017
In January 2017, the home of Yeng*, a church leader, was burned to the ground. He and his family were away when the attack happened at 1am.

Recent country developments

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

- [Laos: Communist leaders proud of progress?](#)
30 April 2018
According to the World Bank, Laos is one of the fastest growing economies in the East Asian and Pacific region and the 13th fastest growing economy globally. But in order to keep control, the Communist Party puts enormous pressure on society, including the small Christian minority.

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