



CAMBODIA: Country Dossier

June 2018



OpenDoors

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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.

CAMBODIA – Country Dossier (June 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.

CAMBODIA		
World Watch List	Score	Rank
WWL 2018	No published details	-
WWL 2017	No published details	-
WWL 2016	No published details	-
WWL 2015	No published details	-
WWL 2014	No published details	-

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 CAMBODIA

Link for general background information:

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-13006539>

Recent country history

Having endured civil war and the killings carried out by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s, Cambodia has since experienced relative stability, despite the fact that Hun Sen, leader of the Cambodian Peoples' Party, mounted a coup in 1997. In 2015, Prime Minister Hun Sen marked 30 years in power.

Cambodia has been named the youngest one-party-state in the world, after Hun Sen dissolved the opposition party "Cambodia National Rescue Party" (CNRP) in September 2017. In the local elections, held in June 2017, this party had gained a surprisingly strong 43% of votes and had leading positions in more than one quarter of all local governments. This outcome indicated that despite the reasonably healthy economic situation, people were not satisfied with the autocratic and dictatorial style of government, especially with the all-encompassing levels of corruption. Voters were not intimidated by Hun Sen's threats that voting against his Cambodia Peoples' Party meant risking civil war.

The election shock did not last long. Prime Minister Hun Sen not only dissolved the opposition party, he also had its leader arrested on charges of treason. Notwithstanding international protests, this seriously weakened the opposition and made the elections a farce. This was illustrated well when Hun Sen reallocated the now defunct opposition seats to other parties (all of which were aligned with the government). Consequently, Western democracies threatened to freeze development aid. This had, of course, been anticipated by the Cambodian government which now decided to lean more on China for funds.

The religious landscape

Cambodia is predominantly Buddhist, making up 85.9% of the population according to WCD statistics, although this Buddhism is often mixed with animistic traits. Ethnically, it is even more homogenous with around 90% of the population being Khmer and smaller fraction of Highland Tribes, Vietnamese ethnicities and Cham Muslims. The country has a long and violent history, however, the authorities have not used religion as leverage to unite all citizens behind them, so far. But there is a strong sense that 'being Khmer' means 'being Buddhist' and this is partly reflected in the country's laws as well.

The political landscape

Prime Minister Hun Sen announced his intention to hold national elections in July 2018, as scheduled. This shows two things: 1) He is not worried at all about international headlines (and

probably does not need to, since he is backed by China), and 2) He is very sure about the outcome of the elections, now that he has quashed the strongest opposition party and restricted the most independent media even further. Since August 2017, Radio Free Asia and Voice of America together with 17 other media outlets had to cease publications in Cambodia. In September 2017, tax authorities forced newspaper “Cambodian Daily” to cease publication. All this means that public dissent, even if only published in the most moderate manner, is impossible and will be prosecuted. As one in-country observer stated: “Change has become a lot riskier and that's all the government needs — for the people to feel that.” The more dangerous it becomes to speak out, the costlier opposition becomes, and the less people will dare to be identified with it.

Another important development is how Hun Sen has been promoting family members to positions of high responsibility. In January 2018, he promoted his son-in-law to the position of deputy national police chief. This promotion came in the same week as his 33rd anniversary of being in power. The national police chief is married to Hun Sen’s niece and his daughter chairs several media businesses. His son (and potential successor) is deputy commander of the armed forces. Ruling Cambodia has therefore become family business.

The socio-economic landscape

Due to Cambodia’s history in the 1970s, the idea of statehood and of being a “Khmer nation” has almost been totally suppressed. Nevertheless, there is still a strong sense of uniqueness and of being united. It may be too strong to call it nationalism and it is not tied to religion yet, but increasingly, the sense of a national identity is felt among the people. However, what is much more important to the population is the socio-economic development. Cambodia remains one of the most corrupt states in the world, with tens of thousands of “ghost civil servants”⁴. Despite strong economic growth (the country enjoyed an annual average growth rate of around 8% in recent years), this did not translate into social improvements as mirrored by a relatively low score on the Human Development Index. The economy is highly dependent on the textile industry, which employs more than half a million workers, 90% of whom are young females. The economic challenges translate into a [growing drug problem](#)⁵ which the authorities are trying to combat by means of a violent crackdown. This is basically forcing drug addicts and their families into hiding.

Concluding remarks

The recent installation of a de facto one-party-system does not bode well for Cambodia’s future, even though it may be kept afloat by China (which may even improve its infrastructure). However, as with other countries, Cambodia too will quickly learn that China does not offer help for free, and to what extent infrastructural improvements will translate

⁴ See: <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/census-reveals-extent-ghost-civil-servants>, last accessed 2018-02-07.

⁵ See: https://international.la-croix.com/news/cambodia-s-drugs-crackdown-pushes-users-into-hiding/6789?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=e-mail&utm_content=24-01-2018&utm_campaign=newsletter_crx_lci&PMID=58d1f792a26689dfa2699c74ec4d75ae, last accessed 2018-02-07.

into improved living conditions for all citizens remains to be seen. Civil rights will continue to take a backseat and the small Christian minority will continue being watched with suspicion and monitored. After 33 years in power, Prime Minister Hun Sen seems to be as strong as never before. There are no signs of protests, let alone any of the revolutionary movements he named to justify his closure of the opposition. But if any sort of opposition did now arise, and the prime minister may feel the need for it, he may well start using religion as a unifying factor, as has been happened in other countries. This would mean that the Persecution engines *Dictatorial paranoia* and *Religious nationalism* would then join forces. The outcome of the national elections in July 2018, even though there is no opposition left, may give some first hints on this.

WWL 2018: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
16,076,000	456,000	2.8

Source: WCD, May 2017

How did Christians get there?

The first known effort to reach Cambodia with the Christian message was undertaken by a Portuguese missionary in 1555/56, but failed to bear fruit. Despite being colonized by France in the 19th century, Catholicism did not make substantial inroads. Similarly, a first Protestant mission entered Cambodia in 1923 with the Christian and Missionary Alliance but made little progress and closed when war erupted in 1970. At the start of the civil war, only an estimated 20,000 Christians were living in the country. These were mostly Roman Catholics and many were Vietnamese.

What church networks exist today? ⁶

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist
-	47,700	290,000	140,000	230	-22,100	267,000	322,000

Source: WCD, May 2017

Although Roman Catholics form the main historical church community in Cambodia, they only make up the minority of Christians today. Various Protestant denominations also exist and some of these are reportedly showing strong growth, particularly the Evangelical Church. There is still a widespread perception today that Christianity is a foreign religion and does not belong to Cambodia, which is traditionally Buddhist, but is often mixed with elements of animism, as is the case in other Buddhist countries of the region.

Religious context (selection)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others ⁷
456,000	261,000	28,100	13,804,000	697,000	150	18,100	453,300

Source: WCD, May 2017

According to the last census in 2008, more than 96% of the population reported themselves to be Buddhists. Almost 2% said they were Muslim and 0.37% Christian. There has been growth among Christians over the last decade, but many converts to Christianity prefer not to be too public about their faith.

Notes on the current situation

- Over the past years, the government has been tightening controls on the freedom of expression, association and assembly. Media censorship is increasing, especially on the Internet.
- Although the number of new churches planted per year is declining, the number of Christians is increasing. Some reports say that Cambodia has one of the highest rates of church growth in the world. Even so, the Christian population is still only about 2.8%, but has increased from virtually 0% in the 1990s.

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.

WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Where persecution comes from

Cambodia is officially a kingdom, but also - in one country observer's opinion - a "vaguely Communist state". However, Communism is no longer the state ideology and is really only apparent in the way the country is run administratively. This is strongly felt by all religions, more so by religions which are considered as foreign to the country, like Christianity. The government persecutes Christians in an indirect manner through its oppression and control of Christian activities. Converts to Christianity with Buddhist or Muslim backgrounds commonly face difficulties with their families and sometimes with neighbors and friends too. The family's honor has been affected when a family member becomes a Christian believer. If the Christian convert is still living under the same roof as his or her non-Christian parents, he/she will be expected to participate in Buddhist/animistic rituals. Refusal can cause serious problems. On the other hand, some Buddhist families will simply say that all religions are good - and if their children believe in Jesus, it is not really an issue.

How Christians are suffering

Historical Christian communities (such as Roman Catholics) generally have freedom to exercise their faith, aside from being monitored. However, if they engage in political activities, they will run into trouble, like everyone else who is seen as a threat to the regime.

Converts come from a Buddhist or a Muslim background, although the latter is a very small community. Converts usually face pressure from family members to return to their original religion. However, the pressure they face is not usually intense, except in a few sporadic cases.

Almost all Independent and Evangelical churches in Cambodia have only become established since the country's peace accord in 1991. They have spread throughout the country and face the brunt of government restrictions. Nevertheless, persecution is still comparably low.

Examples

- Conversion is generally opposed by families of converts and therefore, converts prefer to keep it private if they have decided to accept the Christian faith. However, this depends on the families as well. If young converts want to marry, they can experience family hostility if they decide to have a Christian wedding ceremony. The parents may force their children to have a Buddhist ceremony by threatening not to pay for the wedding or in rarer cases by threatening to disown them if they do not have a Buddhist ceremony. For families, traditions and religion are important and so they will go a long way to avoid anything detrimental to family honor.
- Churches cannot operate freely. The law requires all religious groups, including Buddhist groups, to register with the Ministry of Cults and Religions (MCR). Moreover, all religious groups are required to disclose to the government their goals, activities,

and sources of funding. Registration takes up to 90 days and requires approval from many local, provincial and national level government offices.

- The continuing saga of Montagnard Christian refugees who fled to Cambodia from central Vietnamese provinces because of persecution took a new turn in the WWL 2018 reporting period. While more than 100 refugees have been repatriated, it was reported in April 2017 that since March 2017, 50 Montagnards [fled from Cambodia to Thailand](#)⁸, illustrating just how strongly they seek to avoid persecution in Vietnam.
- There is no reported violence against Christians, but it has to be kept in mind that Cambodia is largely rural and violence within families may not be reported.

WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

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Position on World Watch List (WWL)

Score and rank are not available for publishing. Cambodia’s mix of various religions, ethnicities and Persecution engines shows it is a relatively typical example of a country in South East Asia. The main persecution engines are Dictatorial paranoia and Communist and post-Communist oppression.

⁸ See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/montagnards-04032017130748.html>, last accessed 1 October 2017.

Persecution engines

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

Dictatorial paranoia (Very Strong):

When Prime Minister Hun Sen first came to power, his administration focused mainly on overcoming the country's dire history of war and genocide. As the years passed, it became ever clearer that he refuses to allow any opposition to emerge - let alone take positions of power - whether nationally or locally. After more than thirty years in power, Hun Sen has become a dictator, acting swiftly and brutally against anyone perceived as criticizing his rule. Hun Sen and his party, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), have become notorious for doing everything necessary to retain political power, which includes the silencing of dissent at any cost. Consequently, people do not want to get on the wrong side of the government. All churches have to stay under close monitoring and regulation to ensure that they are not becoming dangerous.

Communist and post-Communist oppression (Strong):

Cambodia is officially a kingdom, but also – in one country observer's opinion - a "vaguely Communist state". However, Communism is no longer the state ideology and is really only apparent in the way the country is run administratively. This is strongly felt by all religions, more so by religions which are considered as foreign to the country, like Christianity. This persecution engine is inextricably linked to *Religious nationalism* (see below).

Religious nationalism (Medium):

Buddhism is dominant in the country, but the state has not yet chosen to use religion for securing its position of power. Buddhist families may act in a hostile manner towards Christians if a family member has converted. However, this Persecution engine is not as strong in Cambodia as it is in other countries of the region.

Ethnic antagonism (Medium):

Unlike other countries in the region, Cambodia is ethnically homogenous with 95% of the population being ethnic Khmer. The Khmer follow Buddhism mixed with animist/spiritistic beliefs. If someone leaves these beliefs and refuses to perform related practices, he or she is perceived as leaving the community and induces the spirits' wrath upon the whole community. Being Khmer means sharing these beliefs and participating in these rites.

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.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Cambodia	Level of influence
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very strong
Ethnic group leaders	Very weak
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Weak
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very weak
Violent religious groups	Not at all
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Medium
Own (extended) family	Medium
Political parties at any level from local to national	Very weak
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

The government has a Communist heritage and persecutes Christians in an indirect manner through its oppression and control of Christian activities. Converts to Christianity with Buddhist or Muslim backgrounds commonly face difficulties with their families and sometimes with neighbors and friends too. The family's honor has been affected when a family member becomes a Christian believer. If the Christian convert is still living under the same roof as his or her non-Christian parents, he/she will be expected to participate in Buddhist/animistic rituals. Refusal can cause serious problems. On the other hand, some Buddhist families will simply say that all religions are good - and if their children believe in Jesus, it is not really an issue.

Context

On the one hand, Cambodia is in many ways a unique country in South East Asia. However, in several respects it also displays features typical of many countries in the region. It has a long history of being ravaged by war: It was deeply affected first by the Vietnam War and then by the Communist Khmer Rouge, which took the whole country captive and instituted a genocide between 1975 and 1979, killing between 1.5 and 3 million people. When neighboring Vietnam intervened, another war unfolded which only ended in 1991. With the help of the United Nations, a hybrid (semi-international) War Crimes Tribunal (the ECCC) was set up which tried and sentenced some of the leaders. However, Cambodia is still troubled by its past and reconciliation is necessary.

Politically, the country has been ruled since 1985 by Prime Minister Hun Sen, who is the world's longest serving head of government. He is also head of the Cambodia Peoples Party (CPP) and over his more than 30 years of ruling the country, he has gained vast experience and the reputation of being a dictator who quashes all opposition – both real and perceived. Until recently, the government had been able to silence potential unrest (and general dissatisfaction about the lack of freedom) by ensuring a strongly growing economy. However, this only partly helped to overcome poverty and other social challenges and the growing dissatisfaction

enabled the opposition party – the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) - to win local elections in June 2017 with more than 46% of votes, despite Hun Sen threatening the country with [civil war](#)¹⁰, if the opposition was elected.

This led the government to act swiftly by cracking down on members of the opposition, NGOs and media outlets in what appears to be a politically-motivated silencing of dissent. In August 2017, 15 local radio stations were required to stop broadcasting for allegedly not adhering to clauses in their contracts. Moreover, a USAID funded, pro-democracy NGO, National Democratic Institute (NDI), was ordered to close down by the Foreign Ministry for not being properly registered. Most notably, the opposition leader, Kem Sokha, was arrested and charged with espionage under Cambodia's treason laws over a speech he gave in Australia several years ago in which he alluded to receiving advice from the USA and Canada. This shows how authoritarianism and the intolerance of critical views in the country is growing fast.

While Western democracies expressed their worries and threatened to place international sanctions on Cambodia, China was more than happy to [step in](#)¹¹ and replace any (financial) support the country may have had from those countries. China will also support Cambodia in holding its [national elections](#)¹² in 2018. China thus gains another ally in the ASEAN community for all the issues to be dealt with there, including the contentious South China Sea issue.

As a remnant of Communism, it is not just Christianity that comes under the authorities' scrutiny: All religions experience state control, although Buddhism is recognized as being an important part of Cambodia's heritage. The Muslim minority, which is ethnically Cham, also faces occasional persecution.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

There is a small community of expatriate Vietnamese Montagnard Christians living as refugees in Cambodia (see Persecution Dynamics for Vietnam). However, they are not deemed to be an involuntarily isolated group and so are not taken into consideration for the purposes of WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities:

The only denomination in this category is the Roman Catholic Church, which has a presence across the whole country. The authorities do not target these churches specifically, one reason being that they are not very active in outreach.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

Converts in Cambodia come from a Buddhist or a Muslim background, although the latter is a very small community. Converts usually face pressure from family members to return to their

¹⁰ See: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/war-05092017165114.html>, last accessed 2 February 2018.

¹¹ See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cambodia-china/china-signs-new-aid-agreements-with-cambodia-idUSKBN1F00IJ?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>, last accessed 2 February 2018.

¹² See: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/deals-01112018165143.html>, last accessed 2 February 2018.

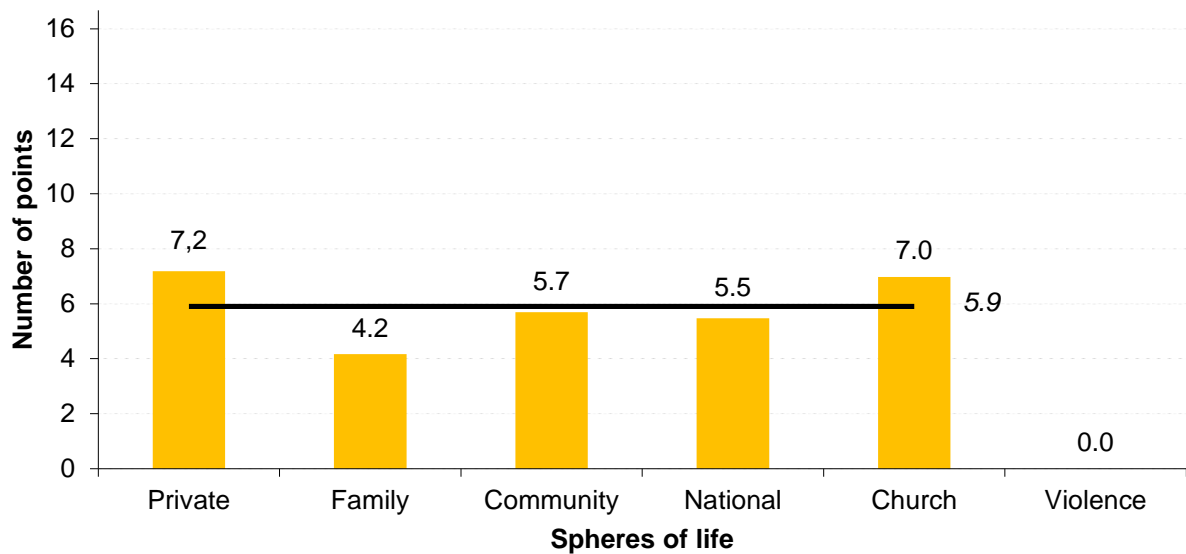
original religion. However, the pressure they face is not usually intense, except in a few sporadic cases.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

Almost all Independent and Evangelical churches in Cambodia have only become established since the country's peace accord in 1991. They are spread across the whole country and face the brunt of restrictions by the government. Nevertheless, persecution is low.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Cambodia



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The WWL 2018 Persecution pattern for Cambodia shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Cambodia is 5.9.
- Pressure on Christians in Cambodia is strongest in the *Private sphere*, followed by the *Church* and *Community spheres*. Pressure on converts is especially acute in the *Private* and *Family spheres*, but all Christians face a growing pressure in the *National* and *Church spheres*. This pressure comes from family on the one hand and from the state as far as the *Church Sphere* is concerned.
- There is no reported violence against Christians, but it has to be kept in mind that Cambodia is largely rural and violence within families may simply be not reported.

Private sphere:

Conversion is generally opposed by the families of converts, who therefore prefer to keep it private if they have decided to accept the Christian faith. However, this depends on the families as well. If family members are strong Buddhist or Muslim believers, it is more likely that the Christian convert has to be careful in worshipping, reading the Bible or talking about

his or her faith. If the family is more open, it may accept the change of religion but family members are still likely to be unhappy since Christianity is seen as a foreign belief.

Family sphere:

When young converts want to marry, they can experience family hostility, if they decide to have a Christian wedding ceremony. The parents may force their children to have a Buddhist ceremony by threatening not to pay for the wedding or - in rarer cases - by threatening to disown them if they do not have a Buddhist ceremony. For families, traditions and religion are important and so they will go a long way to avoid anything blemishing the family honor. The same applies for Christian funerals. For converts, losing their inheritance right is also a well-known issue.

According to Article 33 of Cambodia's law on education: "The state respects the rights and the freedom of religious beliefs. The Ministry in charge of education shall take into consideration Buddhism which is religion of the State. Learners and other persons involved in education shall not be forced to participate, whether directly or indirectly, in religious activities and/or any religious practices as part of the education and/or educational services. Studies of religions in education programs shall be permitted only for general knowledge." In practice, however, all education is influenced by Buddhist teaching and ceremonies, thus making it virtually impossible for Christian children to opt out.

Community sphere:

Church leaders face sporadic harassment by local authorities over issues of registration. In certain villages, Christian pastors are watched closely by the Buddhist villagers. Since Buddhism is acknowledged as the dominant religion in Cambodia, not only students at school, but other Christians as well face instances where they cannot avoid taking part in Buddhist festivals or rituals. Communities, especially in rural areas, often put pressure on new converts to renounce their faith. The Christian may be made to feel shame and embarrassment but it is rare that violence takes place.

Only Buddhist religious instruction is allowed in state schools. Other religious teaching is only permitted in some private schools. As part of the overarching *Dictatorial paranoia* in the country, Christians are often interrogated by the authorities on suspicion that they are engaging in political activities. This happens mainly in the rural areas of Cambodia and shows that Christianity is seen as a Western religion which does not really belong in the country.

National sphere:

Government and Buddhism go together: Christians often find that they are not able to get government jobs because of their faith, especially if they apply for higher positions. Christians generally refrain from expressing their views in public, especially relating to the government or corruption. This is because dissent is dealt with harshly by the government and Christianity is seen as a Western religion. Self-censorship is rampant and there is no free media. Challenges faced by Christians (such as issues of registration) are barely reported on. Unregistered churches refrain from displaying Christian symbols on their buildings and houses.

Church sphere:

Churches cannot operate freely. The law requires all religious groups, including Buddhist groups, to register with the Ministry of Cults and Religions (MCR). Moreover, all religious groups are required to disclose to the government their goals, activities, and sources of funding. Registration takes up to 90 days and requires approval from many local, provincial and national level government offices. Unregistered places of worship and religious schools may be shut down temporarily until they are registered. The law also makes a distinction between “places of worship” and “offices of prayer”. The establishment of a place of worship requires that the founders own a structure with the capacity for a minimum of 200 persons and the land on which it is located and have the support of at least 100 congregants. An office of prayer may be located in a rented property and has no minimum capacity requirement. The permit application for an office of prayer requires the support of at least 25 congregants. In the end, registrations are usually issued, after a long and tedious process (including the paying of expected bribes). Unregistered churches face crackdowns by the authorities. Usually, the authorities single out pastors and church leaders for questioning on matters of registration. All churches are monitored, and outreach is restricted. Door-to-door proselytism is banned.

Violence:

The continuing saga of Montagnard Christian refugees, who left Central Vietnamese provinces because of persecution and fled to Cambodia took a new turn in the WWL 2018 reporting period. While more than 100 refugees have been repatriated, it was reported in April 2017 that 50 Montagnards fled from Cambodia to Thailand [since March 2017](#)¹³, illustrating how strongly they seek to avoid persecution in Vietnam. But this kind of violence is scored for Vietnam, not Cambodia. There is no reported violence against Christians in Cambodia, but it has to be kept in mind that the country is largely rural and violence within families may simply go unreported.

Gender profile of persecution

Female/Male:

No data currently available.

Future outlook

On the one hand, a growing economy and improvements in poverty reduction seem to have weakened Cambodia’s long-held traditions and brought a growing sense that God/religion is not so important after all. On the other hand, it may well happen that the government will try to use religion as a means for staying in power, just as has happened in other South East Asian countries. If Prime Minister Hun Sen and his ruling party, the CPP, deem it necessary, they will uplift the nation’s Buddhist heritage and intensify state control against everything perceived as foreign or Western. Even though *Religious nationalism* is not a serious issue in Cambodia, elsewhere in the region such as in Myanmar, Buddhist nationalism is on the rise. Looking further into the future, if the government was to begin promoting Buddhism over other

¹³ See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/montagnards-04032017130748.html>, last accessed 1 October 2017.

religions, this might well encourage the emergence of radical Buddhist elements. These would be likely to use [hostile rhetoric against minorities such as Christians](#)¹⁴ who are growing in number and influence in the country.

There has been an escalation in the government's intolerance of dissent in recent months. This could pose increased risks for churches seeking greater freedoms in the future. Moreover, since there is a growing culture of authoritarianism, it is likely that churches will be further silenced and scrutinized more intensely for any political affiliation.

Prime Minister Hun Sen seems to have felt the pressure on him increasing. Apart from his usual reaction of threatening the opposition (arresting its leaders, dissolving the main opposition party CNRP etc.), in January 2018 he appeared in a TV documentary in which he showed [another face](#)¹⁵, tearful and obviously haunted by the memories of war. The opposition does not pose a threat to his rule for the time-being, however. Despite creating a new party under the long-term and exiled opposition politician Sam Rainsy, Cambodian opposition [is weak](#)¹⁶ and is unlikely to be able to counter the sense of insecurity rising in the population. With a ruler doing everything to stay in power, in the mid- to long-term, *Religious nationalism* may join *Dictatorial paranoia* and this does not bode well for the small Christian minority.

Policy considerations

Currently under review.

WWR in-depth reports

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

Open Doors article(s) from the region

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

¹⁴ See: https://international.la-croix.com/news/cambodia-s-latter-day-repression-has-khmer-rouge-roots/7009?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=e-mail&utm_content=24-02-2018&utm_campaign=newsletter_crx_lci&PMID=58d1f792a26689dfa2699c74ec4d75ae, last accessed 26 February 2018.

¹⁵ See: <https://www.ucanews.com/news/cambodian-strongman-displays-iron-fist-and-vulnerability/81260>, last accessed 8 February 2018.

¹⁶ See: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/does-cambodias-new-opposition-party-really-matter/>, last accessed 8 February 2018.

World Watch Monitor news articles

At the time of publishing, there were no WWM news articles on Cambodia available.

Any recent updates will be found at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

Recent country developments

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

- [Vietnam/Cambodia/Thailand: Montagnard refugees now aiming for Thailand](#)
7 May 2017
Since March 2017, 50 Vietnamese Montagnard refugees have fled from Cambodia to Thailand to join over 200 others there seeking political asylum. Virtually all are Christians.
- [Cambodia/Vietnam: More Montagnards sent back to Vietnam](#)
23 January 2017
Radio Free Asia reported on 21 December 2016, that Cambodia had sent back thirteen Montagnard Christians to Vietnam, as they did not qualify for refugee status.

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