

World
Watch
Research

Kazakhstan: Full Country Dossier

January 2024



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

January 2024

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Introduction

World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	11	-	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Kazakhstan

Brief country details

Kazakhstan: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
19,407,000	4,859,000	25.0

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Map of country



Kazakhstan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	65	47
WWL 2023	65	48
WWL 2022	64	47
WWL 2021	64	41
WWL 2020	64	35

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

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

Brief description of the persecution situation

Religious freedom is restricted by legislation dating back to September 2011 and the Kazakhstan government is constantly working at increasing its control over the whole of society, which means increased surveillance, raids on meetings and arrests. It is using the threat of militant Islam to restrict more areas of freedom. Russian Orthodox churches experience the least problems from the government as they do not usually attempt to make contact with the Kazakh population. It is the indigenous Christians with a Muslim background who are bearing the brunt of persecution both at the hands of the state and from family, friends and community. Some converts are locked up by their families for long periods, beaten and may eventually be expelled from their communities. Local imams also preach against them.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

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

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

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

- Churches from non-traditional denominations are raided and attendees arbitrarily arrested (ICCPR Arts. 9; 18 and 21)
- Ownership and consultation of religious literature is severely restricted beyond international permitted limitations (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)

- Christians and their activities are monitored by the authorities and surrounding community (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christian female converts run the risk of being abducted and forcibly married to Muslim men (ICCPR Art. 23; CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art. 10)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

There were no violent incidents reported in WWL 2024. However: “More than a third of the 143 known administrative prosecutions in 2022 punished individuals for posting religious texts and recordings on social media accounts without state permission.” (Source: [Forum 18, 31 March 2023](#))

Specific examples of positive developments

- "The new Center for children with Down syndrome in Almaty, inaugurated with the support of the municipal administration and the Samruk-Kazyna Trust Fund for the development of social projects, has become a reality. This allows us to bring our commitment to families and children with Down syndrome to a new level. ...". Catholic priest Guido Trezzani, a long-term missionary in Kazakhstan and National Director of Caritas in the Central Asian nation was also thankful for the commitment of the Catholic community of the archdiocese. (Source: [Agenzia Fides, 7 December 2022](#))
- “Council of Churches Baptists - who refuse to seek state permission to exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief - noted that 2022 was the first in many years where neither courts nor police had fined them for exercising freedom of religion or belief. ‘There were no fines in 2022 - thank God,’ Baptist Nikolai Novikov told Forum 18 from Oral (Uralsk) on 30 March 2023. His church's Christmas service on 8 January 2021 was raided by police, leading to two fines.” (Source: [Forum 18, 31 March 2023](#))

External Links - Situation in brief

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Forum 18, 31 March 2023 - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2821
- Specific examples of positive developments: Agenzia Fides, 7 December 2022 - http://www.fides.org/en/news/73141-ASIA_KAZAKHSTAN_A_new_Center_for_children_with_Down_syndrome_in_Almaty_the_result_of_constructive_dialogue_between_the_Church_and_civil_institutions
- Specific examples of positive developments: Forum 18, 31 March 2023 - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2821

WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Kazakhstan

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 Kazakhstan report	AI Kazakhstan 2022	https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/kazakhstan/report-kazakhstan/	12 July 2023
BBC News Kazakhstan profile - updated 24 March 2023	BBC Kazakhstan profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15263826	12 July 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI Kazakhstan Report 2022	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/KAZ	12 July 2023
CIA World Factbook Kazakhstan - updated 3 July 2023	World Factbook Kazakhstan	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/kazakhstan/	12 July 2023
Crisis24 Kazakhstan report (Garda World)	Crisis24 Kazakhstan report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/kazakhstan	12 July 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit Kazakhstan profile 2023	EIU Kazakhstan profile 2023	https://country.eiu.com/kazakhstan	12 July 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 kazakhstan	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	12 July 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index – covering 29 countries	Democracy Index 2023 Kazakhstan	https://freedomhouse.org/country/kazakhstan/nations-transit/2023	12 July 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 Kazakhstan	https://freedomhouse.org/country/kazakhstan/freedom-world/2023	12 July 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2023 Kazakhstan	https://freedomhouse.org/country/kazakhstan/freedom-net/2023	5 December 2023
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 Kazakhstan profile	https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/kazakhstan/	12 July 2023
Girls Not Brides Kazakhstan report	Girls Not Brides Kazakhstan	https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/kazakhstan/	12 July 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 - Kazakhstan country chapter	HRW 2023 Kazakhstan country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/kazakhstan	12 July 2023
Internet World Stats available in 2023	IWS 2023 Kazakhstan	https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#kz	12 July 2023
OECD Social Institutions and Gender Index 2019 – covering 180 countries	OECD 2019 Kazakhstan	https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/KZ.pdf	12 July 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 Kazakhstan	https://rsf.org/en/kazakhstan	12 July 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2022 Kazakhstan	https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/kaz	12 July 2023
UNDP: Human Development Report Kazakhstan - data updates as of 8 September 2022	UNDP HDR Kazakhstan	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#countries/KAZ	12 July 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Kazakhstan	IRFR 2022 Kazakhstan	https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/kazakhstan/	12 July 2023
USCIRF 2023 Kazakhstan report – (17 CPC / 11 SWL)	USCIRF 2023 Kazakhstan SWL	https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Kazakhstan.pdf	12 July 2023
World Bank Kazakhstan data - 2021	World Bank Kazakhstan data	https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=KAZ	12 July 2023
World Bank Kazakhstan overview 2022	World Bank Kazakhstan overview 2022	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/kazakhstan/overview	12 July 2023
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook Kazakhstan - April 2023	Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 Kazakhstan	https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/d5f32ef2846401f195827b7e020a3e8-0500022021/related/mpo-kaz.pdf	12 July 2023

Recent history

Like all other countries in the Central Asia region, Kazakhstan came into existence as an independent country in 1991. It was the last former Soviet republic to do so - at the end of August 1991. Of all the former Soviet Union states, Kazakhstan has managed the economic transition best. Contrary to all other Central Asian countries, the country's leaders have participated in the international community and are eager to cooperate and host international conventions. In March 2017, an international meeting was held in the Kazakh capital of Astana on the war in Syria. A highlight for Kazakhstan was to be honored with the rotating chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2010.

However, since 2010, the regime under President Nursultan Nazarbayev took on a more authoritarian character, bringing the country more in line with the other countries of Central Asia. Repressive policies, strict media control and legislative restrictions (also in religious affairs) were introduced and implemented – the purpose being to maintain the government's hold on power. A significant change occurred when President Nazarbayev resigned in March 2019 and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev was elected president on 9 June 2019 (see below: *Political and legal landscape*). However, for Christians the new leader has brought little change to their situation so far.

On 20 November 2022, early presidential elections were held in Kazakhstan. As expected, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev easily won. International observers said the elections lacked "competitiveness" while highlighting the need for reforms in the Central Asian nation. (Source: [RFE/RL, 21 November 2022](#)) On 19 March 2023 parliamentary elections were held in Kazakhstan which became another victory for President Tokayev. (Source: [Asia News, 23 March 2023](#))

Violent protests

- **January 2022:** According to HRW 2023 Kazakhstan country chapter: "Kazakhstan was rocked in early January 2022 by nationwide anti-government protests and violence in Almaty, the country's largest city. As of January 11, official and media reports indicate that dozens of people had been killed, including two children, thousands injured, and approximately 10,000 people had been detained. Protests started on January 2 2022 in Zhanaozen, western Kazakhstan, in response to energy price rises, and quickly spread to other cities, with demands growing to include economic and political issues. On January 5, law enforcement used tear gas and stun grenades to break up protests, while unknown people in civilian clothes in Almaty started attacking police officers and public buildings and looting shops. President Kasym-Jomart Tokaev replaced his government, disrupted internet access, declared a state of emergency, and requested military help from the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, a six-country regional military alliance including Russia. On January 7 he ordered troops to 'shoot to kill without warning'."
- **October 2022:** The government of Kazakhstan proclaimed a large amnesty for the protestors. (Source: [RFE/RL, 27 October 2022](#)).

The Ukraine conflict

Kazakhstan is a close Russian ally and when war broke out between Russia and Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Kazakhstan's government held back from making any comment. This changed, however, in early April 2022 when the Kazakh Foreign Minister said his country - unlike Russia - did not recognize districts in Ukraine's eastern regions of Luhansk and Donetsk controlled by Russia-backed separatists as being independent. (Source: [RFE/RL, 5 April 2022](#)) This was [confirmed](#) by President Tokayev (RFE/RL, 6 April 2022). One of the consequences of Kazakhstan staying out of the war was that, in October 2022, 200,000 Russians left their homeland for Kazakhstan. (Source: [RFE/RL, 4 October 2022](#))

Political and legal landscape

Kazakhstan is officially a democratic, secular, unitary, constitutional republic with a diverse cultural heritage. From 1991 to 2019 its first and only president was Nursultan Nazarbayev. The president may veto legislation that has been passed by parliament and is also the commander in chief of the armed forces. The prime minister chairs the Cabinet of Ministers and serves as Kazakhstan's head of government. Although four parties are represented in the Kazakh parliament (Majilis), there is no real political opposition. This was particularly apparent during the presidential elections on 26 April 2015 when President Nazarbayev had no real opponents and won the elections with 97.7% of the votes, which enabled him to start his fifth five-year term as the country's president.

The question of who would succeed President Nazarbayev was answered by the 78 year old president himself. On 19 March 2019, he publicly announced out of the blue that he was resigning ([RFE/RL, 19 March 2019](#)). In a televised address to the nation he indicated that the speaker of the upper parliament chamber, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, would be acting president for the remainder of what would have been his term, in accordance with the Constitution. [Unsurprisingly](#), Tokayev was re-elected as president in the snap elections on 9 June 2019 with 70.76% of the vote (Asia News, 10 June 2019).

In May 2020, President Tokayev announced that he had removed Dariga Nursultanovna Nazarbayeva (i.e. the daughter of the former president) from her position as Senate speaker. This was totally unexpected as everyone believed Nazarbayeva would follow in her father's steps to govern Kazakhstan. (Source: [Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 9 July 2020](#)) The growing gap between the government of Tokayev and his predecessor became visible in January 2023 when Kazakh lawmakers approved a move annulling the Law on the First President-Leader of the Nation (Elbasy), depriving immediate family members of the Central Asian nation's former authoritarian President Nursultan Nazarbaev of legal immunity. (Source: [RFE/RL, 13 January 2023](#))

In politics and economy Kazakhstan is increasingly linking up with Russia (and China). This is partly due to the large number of ethnic Russian citizens in the northern part of Kazakhstan. At the same time, Kazakhstan announced its plans to change from using the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet by 2025.

Parliamentary elections were held on 11 January 2021 and the Central Election Commission declared the overwhelming victory (with 71% of the vote) of the Nur Otan party, led by President Tokayev, who described the election as "a further step in the country's democratic development". (Source: [Agenzia Fides, 12 January 2021](#)) In November 2022 presidential elections were held, which were won by President Tokayev (see above: *Recent history*).

On 23 December 2021, the upper chamber of Kazakh's parliament approved a bill on abolishing the death penalty in the Central Asian nation. The Senate's approval of the bill came almost a year after President Tokayev signed off a parliamentary ratification of a UN human rights protocol aimed at abolishing the death penalty worldwide. (Source: [RFE/RL, 23 December 2021](#))

Kazakhstan held a [referendum](#) on 5 June 2022 on constitutional changes aimed at decentralizing decision-making. Encouraged by the clear majority approving the changes, the president now intends to make progress with the democratic reforms. (Source: Reuters, 6 June 2022)

The Constitution

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Kazakhstan): "The constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides for freedom of religion and belief as well as the freedom to decline religious affiliation. The Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), part of the Ministry of Information and Social Development (MISD), is responsible for religious issues."

The Religion Law

2011: The September 2011 legislation regulating religious affairs was [signed into law in October 2011](#) and contained the following restrictions (Forum 18, 13 October 2011):

- All religious communities need re-registration. This is a highly bureaucratic procedure which may result in only a fraction of all current communities passing the hurdle.
- Unregistered religious activity is banned. Leading, participating in or financing unregistered groups is punished. This has great effects for 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.
- Compulsory religious censorship on religious materials is imposed. While the law states that everyone may acquire or own religious literature, importation and distribution of literature can only be done by registered communities. In-country production requires the full official name of the religious organization which produced it.
- New places of worship need approval from both local and central government.
- All founders or religious communities must be Kazakh citizens.
- Professional educational programs to prepare priests can only be done by organizations that are registered regionally or nationally. For Christians this means, in practice, that this can only be done by the Russian Orthodox Church.
- Religious organizations should take steps to prevent underage youth from taking part in their activities if one of the child's parents or legal guardians objects to this. Religious activities on children's holidays, sports and camps etc. are prohibited. Work among children and youth thus became more difficult.
- Foreign citizens working as missionaries need to have an invitation from a registered community in Kazakhstan; they also need to have a personal registration as a missionary. Any granted permission has to be renewed annually.
- Social activities (such as work in hospitals, prisons or old people's homes) can only be done by registered communities.

2019: In January 2019, the government temporarily abandoned its plan to update the country's 2011 Religion Law. The legal amendments under consideration were more restrictive.

2021/2022: On 29 December 2021, President Tokayev signed into law amendments to the Religion Law to make holding religious events away from state-registered places of worship more difficult. (Source: [Forum 18, 5 January 2022](#)) The amendments came into force on 9 January 2022.

Religious Freedom Survey

On 23 June 2022 Forum 18 released its [Religious Freedom Survey](#). The most important issues documented for Kazakhstan were:

- Religion Law changes to widen state religious censorship and to make holding religious meetings away from state-registered places of worship more difficult came into force on 9 January 2022, as nationwide protests against the regime and its policies broke out;

- An interlocking web of laws, including the Religion Law and the Criminal and Administrative Codes making the exercise of freedom of religion and belief illegal without state permission;
- All religious communities being required to have to state permission to exist in the form of state registration. State permission is also required for the places people meet for worship, as well as for activities such as sharing beliefs with others;
- The use of unclear allegations of "extremism" to jail people exercising their freedom of religion and belief and other fundamental freedoms;
- All public expressions of Islam being under the state-controlled Muslim Board, with a ban on all expressions of Islam that are not Sunni Hanafi. This control extends to controlling how people pray by prosecuting and fining Muslims for saying the word "Amen" aloud in mosques;
- Prisoners of conscience being jailed for exercising freedom of religion and belief, these prisoners being tortured with the use of techniques such as being banned from praying, physical violence, denials of medical care, refusals to allow them to visit dying close relatives or attend their funerals (such as the funeral of a prisoner's wife or father), and solitary confinement;
- Banning former prisoners of conscience from a wide and often unspecified "social activity", which can include activities including visiting a place of worship, driving a car, going to a restaurant, or being involved in any group or association;
- Adding those convicted for exercising freedom of religion or belief are added to the Financial Monitoring Agency List of individuals "connected with the financing of terrorism or extremism". Any bank accounts an individual may have are blocked, their families often finding out about the blocking of accounts only when they go to the bank. Individuals remain on the Financial Monitoring Agency List for six or eight years after their sentence has expired as they are deemed still to have a criminal record;
- A strict state censorship regime, imposing censorship of all religious literature (including in electronic form) and objects, strict restrictions on where such texts and objects may be sold or distributed, who may sell or distribute them, and court-ordered destruction - including book burning - of confiscated texts. This includes the use of state "expert analyses" to convict, fine, and jail people in unfair trials;
- State surveillance of all religious communities, one official claiming of surveillance including videoing of a Baptist Church and its congregation: "This isn't spying, this is monitoring, nothing more";
- The regime's use of claims aimed at foreigners of "religious tolerance" and "religious dialogue" to camouflage its serious violations of the freedom of religion and belief and other fundamental freedoms;
- The regime's election to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council, despite ignoring multiple recommendations from the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Special Rapporteur on the rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association, the UN Special Rapporteur for Protecting Human Rights while Countering Terrorism, and the UN Human Rights Committee, among others.

Christians in Kazakhstan play no role in the country's politics. There is no Christian political party.

Gender perspective

A 2019 CEDAW periodic report noted that Kazakhstan has introduced several positive laws and policies to combat gender inequality. It observed several ongoing issues however, such as: harmful gender norms and stereotypes, son-preference, child and/or forced marriage, and violence against women ([CEDAW, 2019](#)). Under Kazakh law, men and women have equal rights to enter marriage, must enter it freely, and be 18 years of age. Many continue to marry through religious or traditional marriages however, which offer individuals no legal protection. The practice of bride-kidnapping and forced marriages is reportedly on the rise, primarily in rural areas ([Kennan Institute, May 2020](#)). Legislation on domestic violence has tightened, but fails to criminalize it as a [stand-alone offence](#) (HRW Dispatches, 9 March 2022). It remains prevalent and underreported, and rose in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic ([HRW Dispatches, 9 April 2020](#)).

Military service is mandatory for all men between the age of 18 and 27 in Kazakhstan, although there are several circumstances whereby individuals can be exempted ([eGov, August 2022](#)). Christian men have reportedly experienced pressure due to their faith within this predominately Muslim context.

Religious landscape

Kazakhstan: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	4,859,000	25.0
Muslim	13,868,000	71.5
Hindu	920	0.0
Buddhist	21,200	0.1
Ethno-religionist	30,300	0.2
Jewish	5,500	0.0
Bahai	9,800	0.1
Atheist	80,900	0.4
Agnostic	517,000	2.7
Other	13,780	0.1
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

According to the World Christian Database (WCD March 2023) 71.5% of the population of Kazakhstan is (predominantly Sunni) Muslim. However, it would be wrong to call Kazakhstan a Muslim country. 70 years of atheism during the Soviet era have left a deep influence; the government (the heirs of the atheist Soviets) is staunchly secular and seeks to keep Islam under

control, while the overwhelming majority of the population merely follows Islamic traditions rather than strict Muslim teachings. Nevertheless, “to be a Kazakh is to be a Muslim” is the belief of many Kazakhs. As a result, converts to Christianity experience much pressure from family, friends and local community. This pressure is much stronger in rural areas than in the major cities. Relatives will oppress converts to Christianity, sometimes using physical abuse, in attempts to make them turn back to Islam. Sometimes this is also done by the local police.

Kazakhstan has by far the biggest Christian presence in Central Asia. According to WCD 2023, 25.0% of the population are Christians. The reason for this is not that Kazakhs have converted on a large scale to Christianity, but is due to the presence of a large Russian minority in the country’s northern provinces. As a result, more than 90% of all Christians in Kazakhstan belong to the Russian Orthodox Church. In contrast to other countries in Central Asia, Kazakhstan has not experienced a mass emigration of ethnic Russians.

Although the regime has imposed many restrictions on the production, importation and distribution of religious materials, the very long and open border with Russia means that access is less problematic than into other Central Asian countries.

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Kazakhstan):

- “Observers said authorities continued to fine, arrest, detain, or imprison individuals on account of their religious beliefs or affiliation; prevent unregistered groups from practicing their faith; restrict assembly for peaceful religious activities; restrict public manifestation of religious belief; restrict religious expression and customs, including the use of religious attire; criminalize speech 'inciting religious discord'; restrict proselytism; restrict the publication and distribution of religious literature; and censor religious content.”
- “According to local and international observers, authorities continued to conduct additional scrutiny of some groups and individuals with religious beliefs and practices the government considered 'nontraditional' and impose restrictions on their activities. This included some non-Lutheran Protestant Christian groups. The government also restricted use of buildings for religious ceremonies and purposes. Observers reported that the "notification" procedures established under December 2021 amendments to the Law on Religion simplified the process for holding religious events outside of registered religious buildings but gave government officials the opportunity to deny permission for events, and so continued to function in practice as approval procedures. The government continued to raid religious services and, in some cases, prosecute individuals for 'illegal missionary activity'.”
- "Some small religious groups reported they had chosen not to attempt registration due to their history of registration denials, their inability to meet the 50-person local registration requirement, or due to fears registration as religious organizations would leave them vulnerable to legal allegations of 'psychological harm' against existing or former community members. Some religious minority groups engaged in ongoing legal processes to attempt to prevent local governments from seizing property based on legal rulings from previous years. Some small, registered, non-violent religious groups faced difficulties in opening bank accounts, possibly due to intentional or accidental inclusion in lists of entities associated with terrorist financing. Other groups, including the Church of Scientology and some

Protestant groups, reported improved relations with local government contacts, active government engagement to address cases of religious discrimination by lower-level authorities, and a significant decrease in government-backed, anti-religious propaganda.”

According to USCIRF 2023 Kazakhstan SWL:

- “Non-Muslim religious minorities, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestant Christians, also encountered restrictions on religious activities, including raids on unauthorized meetings, negative publicity from state-sponsored groups, and forced official apologies for missionary activities. In a positive development, the official Financial Monitoring Agency removed several Jehovah's Witness associations and members of the Church of Scientology from a secret list of 'high-risk' entities that prevented them from accessing banking services for the past few years. It remains unclear how many other organizations and individuals may be included on this list, as Protestant churches have reportedly experienced similar issues.”

Economic landscape

According to World Bank Kazakhstan data:

- **GDP (current US\$):** 191.11 billion (in 2021)
- **GDP annual growth:** 4.3% (in 2021)

Kazakhstan has vast resources of oil, gas and various minerals. The current regime has promoted market reforms and has transformed Kazakhstan into the second largest economy of the former Soviet empire (after Russia). Despite the fact that the country was hit hard by the financial crisis that started in 2008 (and later by the economic sanctions imposed by the West on Russia after it had annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of the Crimea in early 2014), Kazakhstan remains the wealthiest country in the region. As a result, Kazakhstan is the only country in the region that has few labor migrants abroad, but hosts many labor migrants from other Central Asia countries (such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan). This offers opportunities for Christian outreach among these people. When the COVID-19 crisis struck, thousands of these migrant were stranded in Kazakhstan's southern region of Turkistan because they were unable to travel back home due to restrictions imposed to combat the pandemic. (Source: [RFE/RL, 3 July 2020](#))

A key challenge for Kazakhstan is to diversify its economy while overcoming the geographic constraints of being a landlocked country. The difficulties of diversifying an oil-dependent economy are many. As was seen in Kazakhstan's negotiations to join the World Trade organization, the country's leaders are also acutely aware of the "distance tax" (i.e. the extra costs involved in being a landlocked country) which creates a markup on its export goods that make them more difficult to market. Kazakhstan's strategies for economic reform should be seen against this background. The development of agriculture, an economy of "simple things" and a major emphasis on digitalization are all economic strategies congruent with Kazakhstan's geographical constraints. Their success will depend, in part, on whether Kazakhstan's political reforms gain traction. Most importantly, the efforts to combat corruption will be key to make Kazakhstan attractive for foreign investment, and to reduce the burden on Kazakh entrepre-

neurs trying to compete in foreign markets. (Source: [Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 14 December 2021](#))

Kazakhstan holds a strategic position in the East-West connection between China and the West. A new version of the Silk Road is under construction, which is being pushed by both China and Turkey. This means that there are large-scale construction activities underway to build highways for trucks and tracks for trains. China has also been particularly active in Kazakh oil and gas exploration.

The COVID-19 crisis hit the Kazakh economy badly. Oil, gas and copper prices went down. A suspension of work at any of the major oil fields or major copper mines meant an additional loss of revenue the state could ill afford. (Source: [RFE/RL, 3 June 2020](#))

In October 2022, Kazakh officials said more than 50 international companies had relocated from Russia to Kazakhstan since Moscow launched its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. (Source: [RFE/RL, 19 October 2022](#))

Gender perspective

Just like the rest of the population, Christians are also suffering from the deteriorating economy. Women are, broadly speaking, more economically vulnerable in Kazakhstan as they are more likely to assume traditional domestic responsibilities in the home. Whilst education rates and participation rates in the labor force are both relatively high, more men act as the primary breadwinners and financial decision-makers, and fewer high-responsibility jobs (such as parliamentary positions) are available for women ([UNDP 2020, The Next Frontier, p.361](#)). Under inheritance laws, men and women have equal rights, and failure to access inheritance is not understood to be a widespread issue of concern. Christian men may face economic discrimination on the grounds of their faith, often through state fines and imprisonment, job loss, or being forced to pay bribes to operate their business.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the World Factbook Kazakhstan:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Kazakh (Qazaq) 69.6%, Russian 17.9%, Uzbek 3.3%, Uyghur 1.5%, Ukrainian 1.3%, Tatar 1%, other 5.3% (2022 est.)
- **Main languages:** Kazakh (official, Qazaq) 83.1% (understand spoken language) and trilingual (Kazakh, Russian, English) 22.3% (2017 est.); Russian (official, used in everyday business, designated the "language of inter-ethnic communication") 94.4% (understand spoken language) (2009 est.)
- **Urban population:** 58.2% of total population (2023)
- **Literacy rate:** 99.8% (male: 99.8%, female: 99.7%) (2020)

According to the UNDP Human Development Report Kazakhstan:

- **HDI score and ranking:** 0.811 (0.808 for females, 0.811 for males), ranking 56 (2021)
- **Total population:** 19.2 million (2021)
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 69.4 years (73.1 for females, 65.5 for males) (2021)

- **Expected years of schooling:** 15.8 years (16.0 for females, 15.5 for males) (2021)
- **Gender Inequality index:** 0.16 (2021)
- **Labor Force Participation Rate (% ages 15 years and older):** Female: 63.3, Male: 75.5 (2021)

The government is successfully promoting the use of the Kazakh language and the renaissance of traditional Kazakh culture. According to RFE/RL reporting on [12 April 2017](#), President Nazarbayev ordered the authorities to come up with a Latin-based alphabet for the Kazakh language by the end of 2017, marking a major shift after nearly 80 years with a Cyrillic-based alphabet. Despite this, 95% of the population of Kazakhstan is still capable of communicating in Russian. According to RFE/RL reporting on [26 April 2019](#): "Nazarbayev announced in April 2017 that all publications, documents, and street signs in Kazakhstan will switch from a Cyrillic-based alphabet to a Latin-based alphabet by 2025." Already in November 2018, the country held a nationwide exam to test students' proficiency with the Latin alphabet, part of the former Soviet republic's shift away from Cyrillic (RFE/RL, [14 November 2018](#)).

Thanks to the former Soviet system of education, practically every citizen in Kazakhstan is literate. This means that people who are interested in the Christian message can read materials in their own language. However, the restrictions imposed by the government (all materials must be approved and only registered groups may be active) mean that most distribution etc. must be done unofficially.

Social reforms

In his September 2022 address to the nation, President Tokayev spoke much about social issues, and in particular about reforms in the education and healthcare sectors. Rural and remote areas in particular do not benefit from the same level of service provision as larger cities and the social reforms introduced by President Tokayev aim at correcting this. (Source: [The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, 7 November 2022](#))

Poverty

In December 2022, [RFE/RL](#) reported that in Kazakhstan, Central Asia's wealthiest country, many citizens are living in a desperate situation and can barely afford to buy food and pay their rent.

In general, Christians experience the same problems as all other people in the country and are not especially targeted economically or socially. The only exception to this is the pressure from the social environment (family, local imams, villagers) on Christians with a Muslim background.

Gender perspective

On 16 November 2021, three Kazakh activists, acting on behalf of five feminist groups and activists - KazFem, Feminita, FemPoint, Svet, and FemAgora - requested permission to hold a peaceful march and rally in Almaty on 8 March 2022. The Almaty city administration, in written responses, denied the requests on 26 November, citing a conflict with "cultural and entertainment events" and "repair and installation works" allegedly scheduled on that day at the exact same location and time. (Source: [HRW, 10 December 2021](#))

According to a report by the Asian Development Bank, cultural norms are generally positive towards the concept of gender equality ([ADB, 2018, p.17](#)). A public opinion study published in 2016 revealed that most men and women believed that the situation for women had improved over the last 10 years ([EBRD, 2016](#)). Women are viewed as active members of society, although are expected to assume more of the traditional domestic duties and are less likely to be granted positions with decision-making power. There remains significant stigma around divorce, such that even sisters of divorcees may struggle to marry.

Domestic violence also remains an ongoing area of concern, particularly as it reportedly worsened in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic ([HRW Dispatches, 9 April 2020](#)). President Tokayev has repeatedly stated that domestic violence is an acute problem and protection of women's rights is key. Yet in January 2022, parliament suspended the review of a new draft domestic violence law and has not, since then, proposed any new legislation offering strengthened protection to women from family abuse. Meanwhile, police and service providers lack appropriate training to identify, prevent, and adequately respond to domestic violence. (Source: HRW 2023 Kazakhstan country chapter)

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2023 Kazakhstan):

- **Internet usage:** 76.6% penetration - survey date: July 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 72.9% penetration - survey date: July 2022

According to World Bank Kazakhstan data:

- **Mobile cellular subscriptions:** 127.5 per 100 people (2021)

According to [NapoleonCat](#) June 2023 data, there were more women (57.8%) using Facebook than men (42.2%). Georgetown also reported that women's cell phone rose to 100% from 90.7% in 2017 (GIWPS 2021 Kazakhstan).

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (Publication date: June 2023):

- “Kazakhstan has one of the most developed telecommunications sectors in the Central Asian region. This is especially true of the mobile segment, where widespread network coverage has enabled very high penetration rates – reaching 180% as far back as 2012. Since those heydays, the mobile and fixed-line segments have both pared back their subscriber numbers to more modest levels. The telcos have still been successful in terms of improving their margins and revenues by growing value-added services along with exploiting the capabilities of their higher-speed networks (4G LTE as well as fibre) to drive significant increases in data usage.”
- “Mobile clearly dominates the telecom sector in Kazakhstan, yet 2020 saw a sharp drop in subscriber numbers for both mobile voice and mobile broadband services as the Covid-19 crisis took hold. Even so, data usage (and revenue) went up at a faster rate as more people started working from home – or found they had more ‘downtime’ to spend on the Internet!”

- “With the exception of fixed-line voice services, Kazakhstan’s telecom market is expected to return to moderate growth from 2022 onwards. The extensive deployment of LTE networks across the country (along with the prospect of 5G services being added to the mix in 2023) points towards an even greater uptake of lucrative mobile broadband services, in particular.”

According to Freedom House's Freedom on the Net report 2023 Kazakhstan:

- “Internet freedom in Kazakhstan continues to face severe restrictions. Unlike during the previous coverage period, the government did not shut down the internet nationwide in response to protests; instead, it throttled internet access locally during protests and rallies. The government routinely blocks websites and orders the removal of content. Online journalists and individuals critical of the government continue to face legal repercussions, and this coverage period also witnessed an increase in physical attacks against online journalists and media outlets ahead of snap presidential and parliamentary elections. News outlets and government institutions experienced significant cyberattacks during the coverage period.”
- “Several national elections were held during the coverage period. Changes to 33 articles of the constitution were approved by referendum in June 2022, and included removing the law giving former president Nursultan Nazarbaev special status. Incumbent president Qasym-Jomart Toqaev was reelected in November 2022, taking 81.3 percent of the vote according to government sources; Toqaev’s authoritarian regime was further entrenched following snap parliamentary elections held in March 2023, which saw Kazakhstan’s ruling party, Amanat, retain its majority in the legislature. None of the polls held during the coverage period were considered to be either free or fair by independent observers.”
- “Former president Nazarbaev ruled Kazakhstan from 1990 to 2019, when he stepped down. Nazarbaev initially maintained significant influence over governance, which waned after the January 2022 protests and riots. In February 2023, President Toqaev invalidated the legal instruments that provided numerous privileges to Nazarbaev and his family members. Parliamentary and presidential elections are neither free nor fair, and major parties exhibit continued political loyalty to the government. The authorities have consistently marginalized or imprisoned genuine opposition figures. The dominant media outlets are either in state hands or owned by government-friendly businessmen. Freedoms of speech and assembly remain restricted, and corruption is endemic.”

Satellite dishes provide a good alternative for many people in Kazakhstan to access international information. The media that are under state control offer only very limited independent information, if at all.

There are many options for Christians to communicate aspects of the Christian faith - via (foreign) websites, via SD cards in smartphones, and via radio and television programs through satellite broadcasts. The situation for books, magazines and DVDs is more problematic since these can be more easily confiscated during raids and searches.

Security situation

Radical Islamic attacks have not occurred in Kazakhstan for roughly a decade. There was a sudden spike at the end of 2011 when there were bombings and killings in Atyrau (western Kazakhstan) and Taraz (southern Kazakhstan); but since then, the government has stepped up its suppression of radical Islamic influence. However, officials have admitted that hundreds of Kazakhs went to Iraq and Syria to join Islamic State group (IS) fighters in recent years. According to RFE/RL, it is said that many were killed fighting as IS militants (Source: [RFE/RL, 10 May 2019](#)). In May 2019, the authorities repatriated 231 Kazakh citizens from Syria many of whom were believed to be IS family members. On 13 May 2019, Kazakh Deputy Foreign Minister Yerzhan Ashikbayev told a press conference that the group included 16 men, 59 women and 156 children, most under six with 18 orphans ([Asia News, 16 May 2019](#)).

From time to time there are border tensions between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In March 2019 Kazakh authorities started conducting elaborate checks of all trucks entering Kazakhstan from Kyrgyzstan. As a result, Kyrgyzstan lashed out at neighboring Kazakhstan over what they saw as burdensome bureaucratic procedures that slowed the movement of trucks across the border to a crawl for the second time in two years ([RFE/RL, 3 April 2019](#)).

On 8 February 2020, there were ethnic clashes in a southern Kazakh district, with mobs torching houses, overturning cars and sending hundreds fleeing into neighboring Kyrgyzstan. At least eight people were killed. This was the worst ethnic violence in the Zhambyl region (130 kilometers west of Almaty) for some years ([RFE/RL, 8 February 2020](#)).

On 28 October 2021, street clashes struck Pidzim, a Kazakh town in the province of Panfilovo. The local authorities spoke of a "fight between young people" that began with verbal clashes and ended in a brawl with the use of sticks and improvised weapons. At a meeting of the municipal assembly, however, it became clear that this was a real inter-ethnic conflict. Pidzim is located 15 kilometres from the Chinese border, and has 12,000 inhabitants: 7,000 Kazakhs and 5,000 Uyghurs, almost all of whom are farmers. Villagers said that 'the conflict did not start yesterday, the youth has long been divided between the different nationalities', calling on the local government to establish a real policy of tolerance. The aim of the meeting was to calm things down, but the videos show that the situation remained very tense. Several residents called for the renaming of the town and the local schools. (Source: [Asia News, 2 November 2021](#))

In general, Christians experience the same problems as all other people in the country and have not been especially targeted as far as national security issues are concerned.

Trends analysis

1) The change in presidential leadership has made little change to the running of the country

When President Nazarbayev abruptly announced his resignation in March 2019, he did not intend to disappear from the political scene. He handed over his public tasks to his chosen candidate (who was then elected in June 2019), but behind the scenes Nazarbayev continued to exert his influence. No major changes have occurred in Kazakhstan since then, with one exception - the removal of Nazarbayev's daughter as Speaker of the Senate.

2) The situation for Christians has deteriorated since 2011

Since the passing of a new law on religion in October 2011 (see *Political and legal landscape*), Christians have been facing very high levels of pressure. The situation has not improved since amendments came into force in January 2022.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: RFE/RL, 21 November 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-toqaev-reelected-landslide-vote/32140154.html>
- Recent history: Asia News, 23 March 2023 - <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Kazakh-elections:-foregone-conclusion,-Toqaev-wins-58026.html>
- Recent history: RFE/RL, 27 October 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-mass-amnesty-january-protests/32104161.html>
- Recent history: RFE/RL, 5 April 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/31787134.html>
- Recent history: confirmed - <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-toqaev-respect-ukraine-integrity/31789173.html>
- Recent history: RFE/RL, 4 October 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-200-000-russians-enter-country-mobilization/32064860.html>
- Political and legal landscape: RFE/RL, 19 March 2019 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-president-nursultan-nazarbaev-says-he-is-resigning-/29830123.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Unsurprisingly - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Tokayev-elected-president-amid-protests-and-arrests-with-almost-71-per-cent-of-the-vote-47242.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 9 July 2020 - <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13629-dariga-nazarbayevas-political-ambitions-effectively-ended-by-president-tokayev.html>
- Political and legal landscape: RFE/RL, 13 January 2023 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-nazarbaev-elbasy-annulled-family-members/32221934.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Agenzia Fides, 12 January 2021 - http://www.fides.org/en/news/69374-ASIA_KAZAKHSTAN_Legislative_elections_Nur_Otan_party_of_former_president_Nazarbayev_wins
- Political and legal landscape: RFE/RL, 23 December 2021 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-approves-law-abolishing-death-penalty/31623072.html>
- Political and legal landscape: referendum - <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/kazakhstan-votes-amend-constitution-referendum-results-2022-06-06/>
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WWL 2024: Church information / Kazakhstan

Christian origins

In the 7th and 8th centuries, Nestorian Christianity spread through southern Kazakhstan. In the year 1009, Nestorian missionaries baptized one of the numerous groups of Mongol-speaking ethnic Kereiti whose Khan took the Christian name Mark, Marguz. In the same period, Nestorian Christianity spread among other peoples of Central Asia, and Metropolitan sees were established.

Timur Lenk (also called Tamar Lane: 1336-1406) eradicated Christianity in the 14th century. Stalin (1878-1953) ordered the deportation of many politically unreliable and religious citizens of the USSR to Kazakhstan during the “Great Purge” in the 1930s. During those years many Russian Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Christians were sent to Central Asia and many of them settled in Kazakhstan. Many church leaders were deported and sent to concentration camps in Kazakhstan. After their release, they started a clandestine ministry among the people. The church grew mainly among the non-Kazakh people.

After the country gained independence in 1991, the new religious liberty allowed missionary and evangelistic efforts to reach thousands of ethnic Kazakhs who embraced Christianity. The indigenous Church (i.e. Christians with a Muslim background), which was practically non-existent in 1990, is now estimated to number around 15,000. The church is not growing rapidly, due to pressure from both the Muslim environment (family, friends and community) and the local authorities.

Church spectrum today

Kazakhstan: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	4,477,000	92.1
Catholic	131,000	2.7
Protestant	52,400	1.1
Independent	157,000	3.2
Unaffiliated	50,000	1.0
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-8,000	-0.2
Total	4,859,400	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	43,900	0.9
Renewalist movement	116,000	2.4

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

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

According to the World Christian Database data of March 2023 the largest official church denominations in Kazakhstan are:

- The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)
- The Ukrainian Orthodox Church
- The Roman Catholic Church

The overwhelming majority of Christians in Kazakhstan are ethnic Russians and Ukrainians. They live mainly in the north of the country.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Rights violations targeting all Christian communities and carried out by government officials can occur all over the country. Pressure from family, friends and community on converts is stronger outside the urban areas.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians: Expatriate Christians in Kazakhstan are not isolated from other Christian groups and are therefore not classed as a separate category in WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities: These groups, of which the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is by far the largest, are not involved in evangelism among Kazakhs. They can function relatively freely since the Kazakh regime does not consider them a threat. Also, the Kazakh government has no interest in provoking Russia by making difficulties for the ROC – the events in eastern Ukraine have set an example.

Converts to Christianity: Christian converts with a Muslim background bear the brunt of the persecution in Kazakhstan. Apart from certain state restrictions, they are also under strong pressure from family, friends and community. For them the latter is by far the more powerful.

Non-traditional Christian communities: The unregistered groups of this category (which include Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations) experience increasing persecution, especially where they are active in evangelism. All Christians in this category risk facing raids, threats, arrests and fines by the authorities.

WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Kazakhstan

Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

Position on the World Watch List

Kazakhstan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	65	47
WWL 2023	65	48
WWL 2022	64	47
WWL 2021	64	41
WWL 2020	64	35

Kazakhstan scored the same as in WWL 2023: 65 points. Though the total score remained at the same level, there were (very) slight increases in *all five spheres of life*. The highest score is at an extreme level in the *Church sphere of life*: 14.3 points; all other spheres of life scored very high. The two main Persecution engines in Kazakhstan (*Dictatorial paranoia* and *Islamic oppression*, the latter blended with *Clan oppression*) are active in all spheres of life, but *Islamic oppression (blended with Clan oppression)* dominates in the *Private and Family spheres of life*, while *Dictatorial paranoia* dominates in the *National and Church spheres of life*. Both engines 'meet' each other in the *Community sphere of life*. Muslim families, friends and villagers exert pressure on converts in particular, while the government imposes many restrictions on church activities. Religious freedom is restricted by legislation dating back to September 2011 and the Kazakhstan government has been working at increasing its control over the whole of society, which has led to increased surveillance, raids on meetings and arrests. The government has also used the threat of militant Islam to restrict more areas of freedom, which also affects the Church.

Persecution engines

Kazakhstan: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Medium
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Medium
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Weak

Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

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

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong)

No religious activities beyond state-run and state-controlled institutions are allowed. Pressure from the authorities has been stepped up since 2015 and raids and arrests have continued. Members of Protestant churches are particularly targeted since they are regarded as a foreign influence aiming to destroy the current political system. Hence their need to be severely controlled.

Islamic oppression (Medium), blended with Clan oppression (Medium)

If indigenous citizens (who are Muslim) convert to Christianity, they are likely to experience pressure and occasionally physical violence from their families, friends and local community to force them to return to their former faith. Some converts are locked up by their families for long periods, beaten and may eventually be expelled from their communities. Local imams preach against them, so adding pressure. As a result, converts will do their best to hide their faith – they become so-called secret believers.

Drivers of persecution

Kazakhstan: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	MEDIUM	-	-	MEDIUM	WEAK	-	-	STRONG	-
Government officials	Medium	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	Strong	-
Ethnic group leaders	Medium	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Medium	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	Weak	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	Very weak	-	-	Very weak	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Kazakhstan: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	MEDIUM	-	-	MEDIUM	WEAK	-	-	STRONG	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Medium	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	Medium	-
One's own (extended) family	Strong	-	-	Strong	Very weak	-	-	-	-
Political parties	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

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

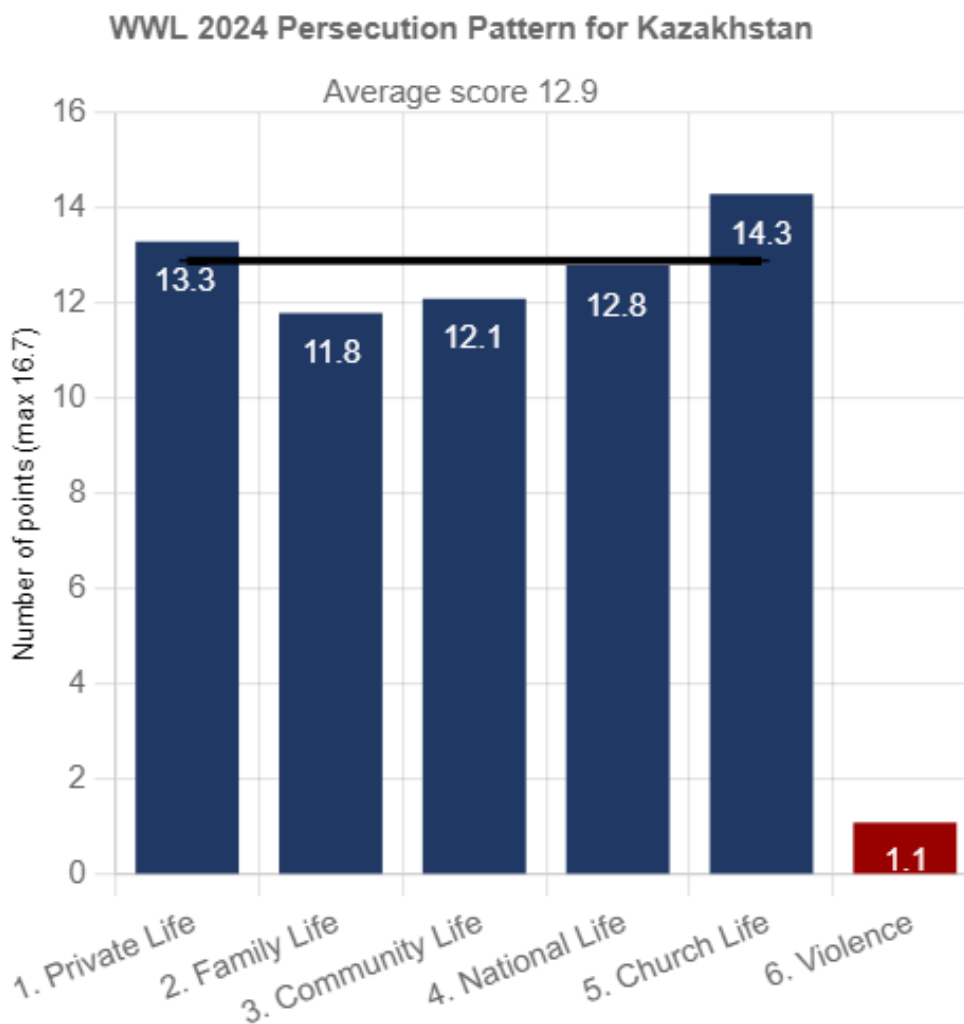
Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- **Government officials (Strong):** The government suppresses all religious activity taking place independently of state control. Protestants have been fined, arrested and had their churches raided. Registration has been denied for years to several Christian groups. It is illegal for non-registered churches to gather, forcing them to go underground and leading to police raids. Religious literature must be approved by the government. Unapproved religious meetings can result in fines and imprisonment, with members being interrogated.
- **Political parties (Strong):** The ruling party functions as a driver since much of the persecution is government-sanctioned.
- **Normal citizens (Medium):** 71% of the population are Muslims. They will protest against any conversions and report Christian activities to the local authorities.

Drivers of Islamic oppression (blended with Clan oppression)

- **Extended family (Strong):** Pressure on converts is exerted by family, friends and community to make them recant their Christian faith and return to Islam. This pressure can be intense and lead to violence.
- **Government officials (Medium):** Local officials will have connections to the Muslim community, affecting their dealings with Christians.
- **Ethnic or Clan group leaders (Medium):** Kazakh leaders (with the support of the authorities) see conversion as an assault against Kazakh identity.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Medium):** Muslim clerics are open in their hostility towards non-Orthodox Christians and particularly against converts from Islam.
- **Normal citizens (Medium):** At the local level, citizens are mostly Muslim and will oppose conversion and have a negative attitude toward Christian activities.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for Kazakhstan shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a very high level (12.9 points), increasing from 12.7 in WWL 2023. There were (very) slight increases in pressure in *all spheres of life*.
- Pressure is very high in *all spheres of life* and is at an extreme level in the *Church sphere of life*. The second highest level of pressure is found in *Private life*. This is an indication that pressure on Christians in Kazakhstan comes from two main sources: *Islamic oppression blended with Clan oppression (Private sphere of life)* and *Dictatorial paranoia (National and Church spheres of life)*.
- The score for violence is very low, remaining at the same score of 1.1 points as in WWL 2023. As in all other countries in Central Asia, reports of violent incidents tend to be few in number.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2024 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (3.50 points)

Christian materials are considered as hard evidence for conversion. For converts at home in the countryside, if such materials are discovered, persecution comes from family and local community. The government of Kazakhstan distinguishes between approved and non-approved materials, and between registered and unregistered Christians. The ROC does not seem to experience problems in this respect.

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

Conversion is the issue that triggers the fiercest reaction from family, friends and community in Kazakhstan. Conversion is viewed as betrayal of the family and culture, as well as of Islam. This can lead to physical violence too. This only affects converts in the countryside. Officially, there is no hindrance to conversion - the laws are secular. But the government is concerned that conversions could lead to tension among the population.

Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (3.25 points)

Converts in the countryside have a problem in this respect as openly showing their new faith will draw negative reactions from their families, friends and the community, but any Christian wearing Christian symbols will draw attention from the Muslim environment. Any non-Orthodox Christian wearing Christian symbols also draws unwanted attention from the state.

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

Converts in the countryside are strongly suppressed from practicing their religion from their family so would definitely be afraid to discuss it with them. It can also affect Russian Protestants as they are traditionally considered sects.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

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

Baptisms are regarded as the final farewell to the faith of the fathers - the final sign of conversion. Family, friends and community will oppose this. Baptisms are regarded by the state with hostility as they are automatically connected to missionary activity and conversion - two activities opposed by the state.

Block 2.6: Christian couples have been hindered in adopting children or serving as foster parents because of their faith. (3.25 points)

Muslim families and communities will block adoption and fostering procedure if it is known that a person is a Christian. The adoption of a Kazakh child into a Christian family is not permitted.

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.25 points)

The Muslim environment (family, friends, community) will pressurize children of converts in particular to attend Islamic instruction - sometimes even against the wishes of their parents. The administration of schools and institutes periodically organize state-funded public meetings about combating "sects". These meetings spread negative propaganda against religious minorities, including against Evangelical churches. These meetings are supposedly voluntary, but everyone is strongly urged to attend.

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.25 points)

Christian children are often slandered and Muslim children are normally kept from having close contact with them. Children of converts are seen as outsiders and so often experience harassment from their Muslim peers.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (3.50 points)

Converts are monitored by their family and surrounding community. Unregistered Christian churches are monitored by the local authorities.

Block 3.1: Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (e.g. for not meeting majority religion or traditional dress codes, beard codes etc.). (3.25 points)

Threats are very common. Converts are threatened by the family, friends and community (including the local imam). Local state officials regularly threaten unregistered Christian groups.

Block 3.12: Christians have been fined for faith-related reasons (e.g. jizya tax, community tax, protection money). (3.25 points)

This occurs frequently and all over the country. Christians are fined for illegal religious activities such as worshiping at a non-registered church, distributing religious literature or sharing their faith. Worst hit are converts and unregistered churches.

Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.25 points)

Known converts will be harassed and interrogated harshly by their family and community. When a meeting is raided, people present will be interrogated, fined and sometimes detained, while all materials found on the spot are confiscated. Once they have been recorded in police records, Christians are required to report regularly.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (3.75 points)

The amendment to the existing Constitution recognizes two religious organizations that are not required to re-register: i) the state-supported Muslim Board and associated religious communities, and ii) the Russian Orthodox Church, as a cultural representative of Russian Federation. Other religious organizations and communities are required to re-register. The registration process is complicated and limits the opportunities for non-traditional religious organizations to operate on an official basis. Islam has no impact on legislation in Kazakhstan. The role of the Muslim community does not reach to this level.

Block 4.3: Christians have been forced by law or in practice to act against their conscience, e.g. regarding military service or in certain professions. (3.75 points)

Military service is obligatory and those Christians who for religious reasons do not want to take up arms, are still forced to join the armed forces.

Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (3.75 points)

It is prohibited to express religious views in public, without official authorization, according to the law regulating religious life. In practice, such permission is only given to state-supported religious organizations.

Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (3.50 points)

There are no Christian political parties in Kazakhstan. There are no Christian civil organizations as they would be falling under the category 'religious' (Kazakhstan is a secular country). There are charity organizations and rehabilitation centers run by Christians, but Muslims regard such activity as a form of missionary activity and will often oppose them.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

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

The law on religion is very restrictive about literature which can only be distributed in registered church buildings, recognized religious educational institutions and special places appointed by the state. In December 2016 President Nazarbayev signed amendments to anti-terrorism legislation which requires compulsory censorship of all religious literature produced and distributed in Kazakhstan. New, more restrictive legal amendments are presently under consideration by parliament. Muslims regard most Christian materials as missionary tools.

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

For all imported materials approval is needed from the Religious Affairs Agency (RAA). Only registered churches can apply for this. And even then it may take a very long time for the RAA to give permission. Muslims have no influence at this level.

Block 5.18: Churches have been hindered in establishing, managing, maintaining and conducting schools, or charitable, humanitarian, medical, social or cultural organizations, institutions and associations. (4.00 points)

According to the law, no religion-based organizations, institutions or schools are allowed. The Muslim community will regard any social work by Christians as a form of missionary activity and will oppose it.

Block 5.12: Churches or Christian organizations have been hindered in printing Christian materials or owning printing presses. (3.75 points)

The law on religion puts restrictions on printing and distributing religious literature. Since January 2017, more restrictions came into force under the law on anti-terrorist activities. (See Block 5.8 above)

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced. Possible reasons for this may be:

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*

- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:

- *Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).*
- *In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.*
- *Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.*

Kazakhstan: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	1	0
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	0	2
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	0	0
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	0	1
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	25	25
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0

Kazakhstan: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	0	0

In the WWL 2024 reporting period:

- **Churches closed:** At least 1 church was closed in Kazakhstan.
- **Christians harassed:** Sources reported that 25 converts (both men and women) had faced harassment at the hands of their Muslim relatives and communities. Most were living in rural areas.

5 Year trends

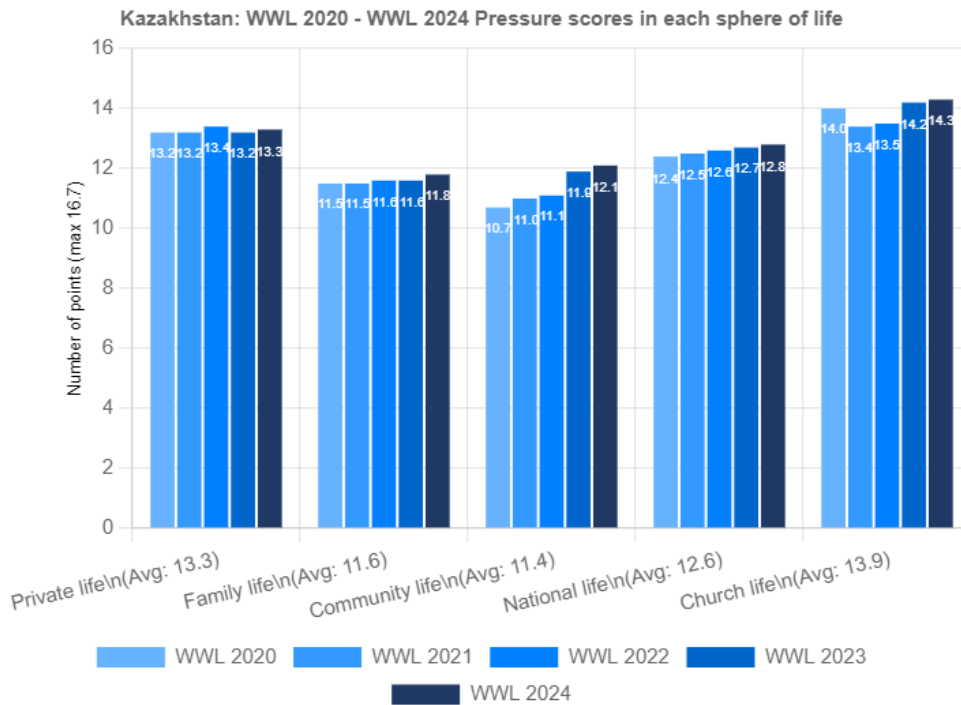
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Kazakhstan: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	12.9
2023	12.7
2022	12.4
2021	12.3
2020	12.4

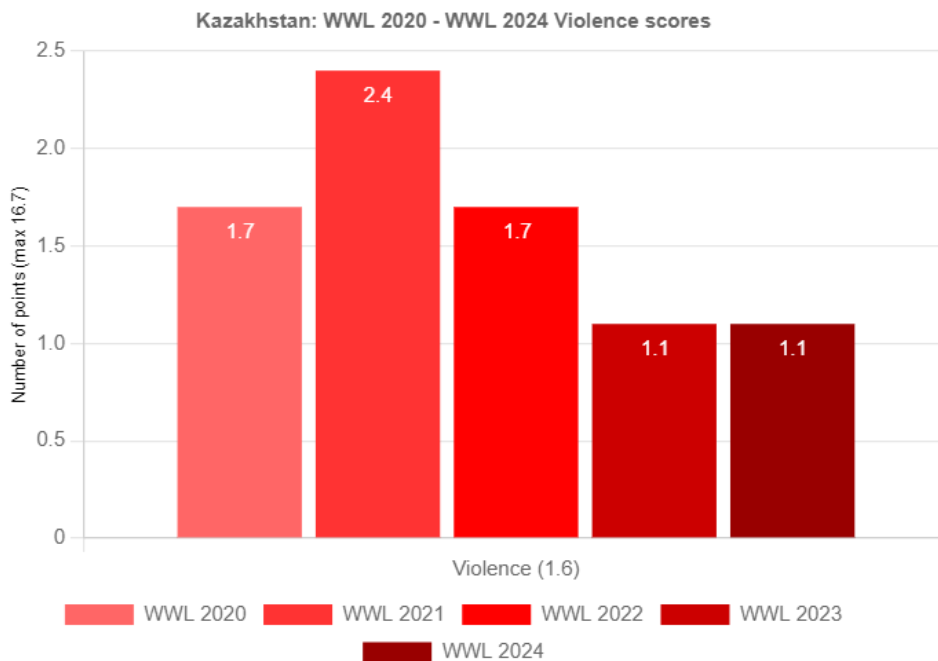
As can be seen from the table above, the average pressure over the 5 spheres of life in Kazakhstan has been constantly very high. After a stabilization during WWL 2020-WWL 2022 at the 12.3/12.4 point mark, there was an increase to 12.7 points in WWL 2023 and to 12.9 points in WWL 2024.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



Pressure was highest throughout in the *Church* and *Private spheres of life*, reflecting the two dominant Persecution engines operating in Kazakhstan. Pressure has more or less levelled off in the *Private* and *Family* spheres. At a lower level, there has been a steady increase in pressure every reporting period in *National* and *Community life*.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



As in many other former Soviet republics, the number of violent incidents in Kazakhstan tends to be low or very low. Over the last five WWL reporting periods, the highest score for violence was in WWL 2021. Since then, the score has generally followed a downward tendency, with the score for WWL 2023 and WWL 2024 being the lowest (1.1 points).

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Denied access to social community/networks; Forced marriage
Security	Abduction; Incarceration by family (house arrest); Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	-
Technological	-

In Kazakhstan the daily life of indigenous people is based on traditional Islamic culture, which disadvantages women and requires total submission. A country expert summarizes: “Traditional culture puts women lower than men and requires obedience to men in the family. For that reason, [a] woman cannot choose her own religion and will be persecuted if she converts to Christianity.” This makes female converts from Islam more vulnerable to persecution, both as Christians and as women who challenge the existing order.

Converts risk suffering physical and verbal abuse, harassment, threats and being put under house arrest. One female convert reported that she had been regularly beaten by her husband a few years previously, and that he kicked her in her stomach while she was pregnant. Despite a strong relationship with her parents, she felt too ashamed to report the beatings to them for fear that she would be viewed as a bad wife. Her husband has since left her to provide for their children by herself, compounding her sense of shame. An expert confirms that whilst both men and women experience physical abuse as a form of persecution, “females may face more physical violence when discovered.”

Facilitating such domestic violence, there has been a notable lack of effective measures to address gender-based violence against women, including a lack of police and support service resources, and policy-makers failing to review a draft domestic violence law that was suspended in 2021 (HRW 2023 Kazakhstan country chapter).

While there have been no reported cases, the risk of being forcibly married to a Muslim remains an ongoing risk for converts. This is sometimes linked to abduction, as part of “[bride kidnapping](#)” practices (RFE/RL, April 2021). Women and girls living in rural areas are most at risk of falling victim to this tradition. Christian women are also vulnerable to sexual assault, an area which remains underreported due to the associated stigma. A country expert explains “it is also considered to be...a woman’s fault if she is physically or sexually abused so when it happens it is kept a secret.”

Spouses and children of converts in the countryside have also experienced pressure from their families who try to keep them within Islam. It is difficult for a woman to escape such pressure as she stands little chance of living on her own, due to high unemployment and a lack of financial independence. The persecution of Christian women serves to create fear and anxiety in families and Christian communities. Targeting women can also be used as an instrument for persecuting their husbands.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via business/job/work access; Economic harassment via fines
Political and Legal	Travel bans/restrictions on movement
Security	Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
Social and Cultural	-
Technological	-

While Kazakhstan has gradually been closing the gap in terms of gender inequality, men continue to assume roles of higher responsibility than women; the religious persecution which Christian men experience reflects this socio-cultural structure. As men are normally the leaders of families and churches, when they become a target of persecution the wider family or church congregation will suffer. If a man loses his job, his wider family suffers. Church leaders in particular remain on the radar of authorities in Kazakhstan.

Pressure on Christian men comes from both the State, as well as the family and community spheres. State-based persecution has included restrictions on travel and fines. Obligatory military service for young men provides an extra potential risk of persecution because it is a highly controlled environment in a Muslim-majority state. One country expert explains that “Christian men have reportedly experienced pressure due to their faith within this predominantly Muslim context. The state is not offering alternative service, so refusal to take part in military service can invite fines and prison sentences.” Those Christians, who for religious reasons, do not want to take up arms are still forced to join the army. It is important to note that those who have converted to Christianity from a Muslim background experience even more pressure from their family, friends and community.

Earning a living remains complicated for Christian men since they are directly affected by the bribes required of Protestants in order to run their businesses. A country expert confirms that “it is difficult for Christians to earn a living – in rural areas in particular, authorities will demand bribes from Christians trying to run businesses.” Converts in the countryside are especially under this pressure at this point. Some business-owners keep their Christian beliefs a secret. Reports indicate that Protestants are persecuted in this way but not Orthodox Christians, and converts face pressure on their businesses from the local authorities and local community. Converts and church leaders particularly risk losing employment due to their faith.

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to HRW 2023 Kazakhstan country chapter:

- “The right to freedom of religion is curtailed, with mandatory registration requirements for religious groups and strict restrictions on religious literature.”
- "On July 19 [2022], a court in southern Kazakhstan sentenced Anatoli Zernichenko to seven years in prison for posting online Muslim texts that authorities claimed 'promoted terrorism'."

According to [Forum 18, 18 November 2022](#):

- "The Financial Monitoring Agency maintains a public list of individuals (1,536 on 14 November), organizations (26 on 14 November), and banned organizations (63 on 14 November) allegedly 'connected with the financing of terrorism or extremism'. This three-part list contains a wide range of individuals and groups, including genuinely terrorist organizations and individuals, a peaceful opposition political party, and individuals convicted of exercising their human rights. Some religious communities are on this public list, including:
 - the Russian Jehovah's Witness congregation in Taganrog (banned in Russia in 2009);
 - the alleged organization of Russian Muslims who meet to study the works of theologian Said Nursi, "Nurdzhular", banned in Russia in 2008 although Russian Muslims deny that it exists;
 - the Tabligh Jamaat Muslim missionary movement, 75 of whose adherents have been criminally convicted in Kazakhstan since 2015."

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Kazakhstan):

- “Observers reported the harshest treatment was of Muslims who practice a version of Islam other than the officially recognized Hanafi school of Sunni Islam.”
- “According to observers and members of minority religious groups, media outlets occasionally issued articles or broadcasts defaming minority religious groups they regarded as ‘nontraditional’, including Jehovah’s Witnesses. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) said members of some religious groups, including Muslims who chose to wear headscarves or other identifying attire, as well as some Christian groups, including evangelical Protestants, Baptists, and Jehovah's Witnesses, continued to face greater societal scrutiny and discrimination.”
- “Jehovah's Witnesses reported that between September 2021 and August 2022, 43 of their members faced difficulties in obtaining statutory exemptions to military service that were legally available to them as religious ministers. In five cases, enlistment offices detained individuals overnight who were seeking exemptions to military service as religious ministers.”
- “Jehovah's Witnesses reported that between September 2021 and August 2022, 25 members of their community received warnings for alleged ‘illegal missionary activity’ and were pressured to discontinue sending letters or making phone calls as part of their evangelizing work, compared with 63 detentions, warnings, and court cases reported in

2020. On October 20, the Almaty City Court upheld the conviction of a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses for engaging in illegal 'missionary activity'. Jehovah's Witnesses asserted the conviction was based on a personal letter and ignored precedent set by the Supreme Court that Jehovah's Witnesses who had shared peaceful personal religious beliefs, including through personal letters, were not engaged in 'missionary activities'."

According to USCIRF 2023 Kazakhstan SWL:

- "The government continued to suppress groups and individuals it perceived as following 'non-traditional' religions, along with Sunni Muslims who do not subscribe to the state's interpretation of Islam. By the end of [2022], at least 10 Muslim men were still imprisoned on charges related to their online religious activity, including discussing their beliefs and sharing religious content. Those in prison include five men sentenced due to their participation in a WhatsApp conversation on Islam in 2019, despite a 2021 United Nations (UN) Working Group opinion that called for their release. In March, an Atyrau court found Sarsen Netekov and Nurlan Atalykov guilty of belonging to the Tablighi Jamaat movement, sentencing both men to a year of restricted freedom and blocking their bank accounts. In July, authorities imprisoned Anatoli Zernichenko for posting excerpts from religious texts on his private Instagram page."

Further information

- "Jehovah's Witnesses complain that the regime has taken 'no action' to implement a 2020 United Nations Human Rights Committee decision finding that Kazakhstan had violated the rights of their leader in the country by banning the earlier import of ten of their publications." (Source: [Forum 18, 13 January 2023](#))

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Dictatorial paranoia

The current government exerts a high level of control over the country. Government officials at all levels are the main persecutors of Christians in Kazakhstan, imposing all kinds of legal restrictions, monitoring all religious activities, carrying out raids on meetings and blocking the availability of religious materials. This is not likely to change in the near future.

Islamic oppression/Clan oppression (blended)

Islam is not the state religion but it is the traditional religion of most of the population. Muslims are treated in the same manner as other religions. Muslim pressure on Christians in Kazakhstan does not come from radical Islamic movements but rather from the far-reaching cultural influence of Muslim family, friends and community on converts. The chances that this will change soon are as good as non-existent.

Due to the stability of these main Persecution engines, Christians in Kazakhstan will continue to face considerable levels of surveillance and pressure.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: bride kidnapping - <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-bride-kidnapping-victim-fights-for-justice/31215297.html>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18, 18 November 2022 - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2791
- Persecution of other religious minorities: : - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2791
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18, 13 January 2023 - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2802

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Kazakhstan>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.