



Reports

Dennis P. Petri

Arrests, sentences and abductions

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International Institute
for Religious Freedom



International Institute
for Religious Freedom

**Internationales Institut für Religionsfreiheit
Institut International pour la Liberté Religieuse
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The International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF) was founded in 2007 with the mission to promote religious freedom for all faiths from an academic perspective. The IIRF aspires to be an authoritative voice on religious freedom. We provide reliable and unbiased data on religious freedom – beyond anecdotal evidence – to strengthen academic research on the topic and to inform public policy at all levels. Our research results are disseminated through the *International Journal for Religious Freedom* and other publications. A particular emphasis of the IIRF is to encourage the study of religious freedom in university institutions through its inclusion in educational curricula and by supporting postgraduate students with research projects.

The IIRF has a global presence with academic and advocacy partners on all continents. We perform original research and in collaboration with our partners. The IIRF is also a “meeting place” for all scholars that take an interest in religious freedom.

We understand Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) as a fundamental and interdependent human right as described in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In line with CCPR General Comment No. 22, we view FoRB as a broad and multidimensional concept that needs to be protected for all faiths in all spheres of society.



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CONTENTS

Arrests, sentences and abductions	5
Arrests and sentences of Christians (2022–2023)	6
Arrests and sentences all religions (2022–2023).....	7
Abductions of Christians (2022–2023)	8
Abductions all religions (2022–2023)	9

Arrests, sentences and abductions

After killings, which we addressed in an earlier article, arrests, sentences, and abductions constitute three major categories of violent incidents that garner substantial coverage in the media. Arrests, in particular, are a favored tactic of hostile governments to intimidate religious leaders who are perceived as threats. Psychological research indicates that even short-term arrests are highly intimidating, both for the individuals detained and their social circles. Even when arrests do not result in actual sentences, the ongoing threat of arrest is deeply unsettling.

One reason arrests are often so intimidating is that the victims, their families, and their congregations (in the case of religious leaders) are not informed of the duration of the detention. According to international law norms, arrests without a judge's warrant cannot extend beyond 48 hours. Surprisingly, many authoritarian governments adhere to this rule, likely to avoid negative international scrutiny, even though they may resort to repeated arrests.

Empirical research on Cuba indicates that arrests of religious leaders are far less frequent today than in the early decades after the communist revolution. However, this does not signify an easing of restrictions; rather, sporadic imprisonments, especially their arbitrary and unpredictable nature, serve as reminders of boundaries that must not be crossed. This is deeply unsettling for religious groups, as confirmed by interview research.

Underreporting is likely widespread because some imprisonments are not directly linked to violations of religious freedom. Many authoritarian regimes fabricate charges to intimidate opponents, including religious leaders, and these fabricated charges are not always recognized as religious freedom violations. For instance, if a religious minister is charged with theft, it may not be reported as a religious freedom violation unless there is evidence that the crime was fabricated to silence a “difficult” religious leader.

Arrests encompass a wide range of situations, from short-term detentions to longer jail sentences, complete confinement, and forced labor. Due to the breadth of this category, we do not distinguish between different types of arrests in this overview, although their severity varies significantly. While many arrests result in sentences, the process can take months or even years to unfold. When information is available, we report it, but systematic reporting is challenging.

In the VID, we have documented arrests of Christians in a total of 28 countries during the 2022-2023 period. The majority of these arrests occurred in China (713), Eritrea (364), Nicaragua (95), Cuba (92), El Salvador (66), and India (54). In these cases, repressive governments targeted Christian leaders. The pro-democracy movement in Nicaragua, now predominantly composed of Catholic clergy due to the near-total elimination of other civil society groups, has attracted attention recently for its unprecedented level in the country. Arrests have been a regular practice in China and Cuba, though their frequency appears to have increased.

Arrests and sentences of Christians (2022–2023)

	Countries	Arrests/detentions	Sentences
1	China	713	21
2	Eritrea	364	0
3	Nicaragua	95	28
4	Cuba	92	21
5	El Salvador	66	0
6	India	54	0
7	Mexico	34	4
8	Myanmar	22	1
9	Egypt	19	4
10	Libya	14	2
11	Sudan	12	1
12	Burundi	11	0
13	Angola	10	0
14	Vietnam	10	0
15	North Korea	5	0
16	Russia	5	2
17	Canada	4	1
18	Iraq	4	1
19	Pakistan	4	0
20	Mozambique	2	0
21	Ukraine	2	0
22	Algeria	1	2
23	Equatorial Guinea	1	0
24	Hong Kong S.A.R.	1	1
24	Ireland	1	1
25	Lebanon	1	0
26	Sri Lanka	1	0
27	Turkey	1	0
28	Venezuela	1	0

When considering other or all religions, a few other countries emerge with very high numbers. Once again, China ranks very high in amount of religion related arrests – most of which are connected to the Uyghurs and other religious-ethnic

minorities. Additionally, Thailand, along with a handful of other countries like Eritrea and Myanmar, exhibits high numbers of arrests.

Arrests and sentences all religions (2022–2023)

	Countries	Arrests/detentions	Sentences
1	China	4723	823
2	Thailand	473	0
3	Eritrea	364	0
4	Nicaragua	95	28
5	Cuba	92	22
6	Myanmar	78	1
7	El Salvador	66	0
8	India	54	0
9	Mexico	34	4
10	Algeria	25	21
11	Vietnam	21	7
12	Egypt	19	7
13	Libya	14	2
14	Mali	14	0
15	Pakistan	14	0
16	Sudan	12	1
17	Burundi	11	0
18	Angola	10	0
19	Saudi Arabia	9	11
20	Kazakhstan	8	4
21	Seychelles	8	0
22	Russia	6	3
23	Bahrain	5	3
24	North Korea	5	0
25	Turkey	5	2
26	Canada	4	1
27	Iraq	4	1
28	Indonesia	2	1
29	Morocco	2	1

30	Mozambique	2	0
31	North Macedonia	2	0
32	Sri Lanka	2	0
33	Ukraine	2	0
34	Cambodia	1	0
35	Equatorial Guinea	1	0
36	Hong Kong S.A.R.	1	1
37	Ireland	1	1
38	Lebanon	1	0
39	Malaysia	1	0
40	Mauritania	1	0
42	Portugal	1	0
43	Venezuela	1	0

We decided to address abductions alongside arrests because they essentially function in a similar manner. Abductions serve as the equivalent of arrests when carried out by non-state actors, such as gangs, militias, criminals, religious insurgencies like Boko Haram, and various other IS-inspired groups. We are not referring to kidnappings conducted as part of illicit operations to demand ransom, but rather kidnappings executed with the aim of intimidating religious ministers who are critical of organized crime operations, and therefore perceived as threats to their activities.

Abductions of Christians (2022–2023)

	Countries	Abductions
1	Nigeria	5868
2	Democratic Republic of the Congo	64
3	Mexico	15
4	Cameroon	14
5	Nicaragua	10
6	Burkina Faso	8
7	Mozambique	7
8	Haiti	7
9	Libya	6
10	Cuba	4
11	Honduras	2
12	Venezuela	1

13	Laos	1
14	Mali	1
15	Syria	1

In terms of abductions of Christians, during the same reporting period, the VID includes records from a total of 15 countries. Nigeria ranks highest, with 5,868 abductions reported between January 2022 and June 2023. Due to security concerns, accurately quantifying abductions of Christians is challenging, as they are often not reported in the media for security reasons. This tactic appears to be favored by criminal organizations (as seen in Mexico) and religious insurgencies (DRC, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Mozambique, Mali, Syria).

When considering abductions across all religions, Nigeria again reports high numbers, indicating that abductions affect not only the Christian population but also many Muslims. Our data shows at least 3,710 abductions of Muslims in addition to the 5,868 abductions of Christians.

Abductions are prevalent in many countries, particularly in Africa and parts of the Middle East, as well as in Latin American countries with a significant presence of organized crime. In the Middle East, a notable abduction incident occurred on October 7, 2023, when the Islamic terrorist organization Hamas attacked Israeli targets, resulting in the killing of 1,200 Jews and the abduction of 253 Israelis and foreigners.

Abductions all religions (2022–2023)

	Countries	Abductions
1	Nigeria	9578
2	Israel	253
3	Democratic Republic of the Congo	73
4	Cameroon	24
5	Yemen	17
6	Mexico	15
7	Central African Republic	15
8	Benin	12
9	Nicaragua	10
10	Burkina Faso	9
11	Mozambique	7
12	Haiti	7
13	Libya	6
14	Cuba	4

15	United States	4
16	Guatemala	2
17	Honduras	2
18	Myanmar	1
19	Mali	1
20	Venezuela	1
21	Laos	1
22	Syria	1

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