



OBSERVATORY OF  
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM  
IN LATIN AMERICA

# General overview of persecution of Christians in Latin America

A research agenda

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29 May 2018

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Abstract

The main persecution engines in Latin America are “Organized corruption and crime”, “Ethnic antagonism”, “Secular intolerance” and “Communist and Post-Communist Oppression.” Because of the historical similarities of Latin American countries, these engines express themselves in similar ways throughout the continent.

Introduction

Using data from the World Watch List (WWL), Open Doors International’s annual index of persecution of Christians, this essay provides a general overview of persecution of Christians in Latin America. Because the annual WWL report covers a worldwide top 50 of countries, only three Latin American countries have been consistently scored: Mexico, Colombia and Cuba. By using a specially designed “extrapolation method”, the available data on these three countries can be used to determine the degrees of presence of all relevant persecution engines in other Latin American countries. It also allows to predict the scores of all countries in the region, making it possible to group countries by severity of persecution. These two elements combined – the degrees of presence of persecution engines and the predicted scores – offer a research agenda for the understanding of persecution of Christians in Latin America.

In this essay, I first provide a brief introduction to the methodology of the World Watch List. I then discuss the prevalent “persecution engines” in Mexico, Colombia and Cuba, Latin America’s highest scoring countries on this index. The third section of this essay discussed the degrees of presence of persecution engines in all the other Latin American countries, which allows to make statistical predictions of WWL scores for these countries. I conclude on a research agenda for Latin America.

## 1. Brief introduction to the methodology of the World Watch List

The World Watch List (WWL) is the index of persecution of Christians that is published annually by Open Doors International, a Christian charity. Although Open Doors International is a faith-based organization which could be labeled as an ‘interest group’ – its programs serve Christians who are persecuted for their faith –, the WWL can be considered as a scholarly tool for the assessment of religious freedom.<sup>1</sup>

In 2012, the methodology of the World Watch List was comprehensively revised in order to meet academic standards.<sup>2</sup> The WWL methodology and the annual publications of the World Watch List are audited by an external entity, the International Institute for Religious Freedom,<sup>3</sup> a research institution that involves academics from renowned universities. Through this auditing process, the WWL strives to guarantee credibility, transparency, objectivity and academic quality.<sup>4</sup>

One of the specificities of the methodology of the WWL is that it focuses exclusively on Christians. It is based on expert opinions, combining the input from Open Doors’ researchers in the field with that of external experts. Their input comes from a multitude of in-country key contacts, some through questionnaires (long, short or customized), and others through other forms of interaction. Qualified persecution analysts are a third source of information for scoring questionnaires. The input that is gathered from these three streams of information is then used to reconcile and fine-tune the questionnaires, followed by a check by Field researchers of their final draft questionnaires for the respective countries.

The WWL questionnaire consists of a total of 84 questions that describe the pressure in five spheres of life (private, family, community, national and church spheres) and physical violence experienced by Christians. An additional 16 questions in block 7 provide additional information

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<sup>1</sup> Petri Dennis P. *The Vulnerability of Religious Minorities*, PhD thesis at VU University Amsterdam, forthcoming.

<sup>2</sup> One of the authors was personally involved in the process leading to the methodological revision of the World Watch List, having worked for the World Watch Unit of Open Doors between 2011 and 2016.

<sup>3</sup> International Institute for Religious Freedom, [www.iirf.eu](http://www.iirf.eu)

<sup>4</sup> Sauer Christof. (2012). Measuring persecution. The new questionnaire design of the World Watch List. *International Journal of Religious Freedom*, 5 (2)

but are not scored. The highest possible total score on the WWL is 100 points; the higher the score, the more intense the persecution situation.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Latin American countries on the World Watch List

The annual publication of the World Watch List is limited to a top 50 of countries. In addition, a list of “Persecution Watch Countries”, scoring 41 points or more is also published, so in total 75 countries are scored.<sup>6</sup> Because of the higher intensity of persecution in other parts of the world, only three Latin American countries have been scored since its 2012 methodological revision: Mexico, Colombia and Cuba. Figure 1 and 2 summarize the evolution of these countries on the WWL:

Figure 1. WWL History Latin American countries 2012 -2017, ranks and scores

		<b>Mexico</b>	<b>Colombia</b>	<b>Cuba</b>
<b>WWL 2013</b>	<b>Rank</b>	Below 50	46	Below 50
	<b>Score</b>	31	41	29
<b>WWL 2014</b>	<b>Rank</b>	53	25	Below 50
	<b>Score</b>	43	56	26
<b>WWL 2015<sup>7</sup></b>	<b>Rank</b>	38	35	Below 50
	<b>Score</b>	55	55	40
<b>WWL 2016<sup>8</sup></b>	<b>Rank</b>	40	46	Below 50
	<b>Score</b>	56	55	42
<b>WWL 2017<sup>9</sup></b>	<b>Rank</b>	41	50	Below 50
	<b>Score</b>	57	53	42
<b>WWL 2018<sup>10</sup></b>	<b>Rank</b>	39	49	Below 50 (56)
	<b>Score</b>	59	56	49

Source: Open Doors International (2018).

<sup>5</sup> The full methodology of the World Watch List can be accessed here: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/WWL-2018-Methodology-LONG-VERSION-November-2017.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> There are plans to move to a longer list in the course of 2018.

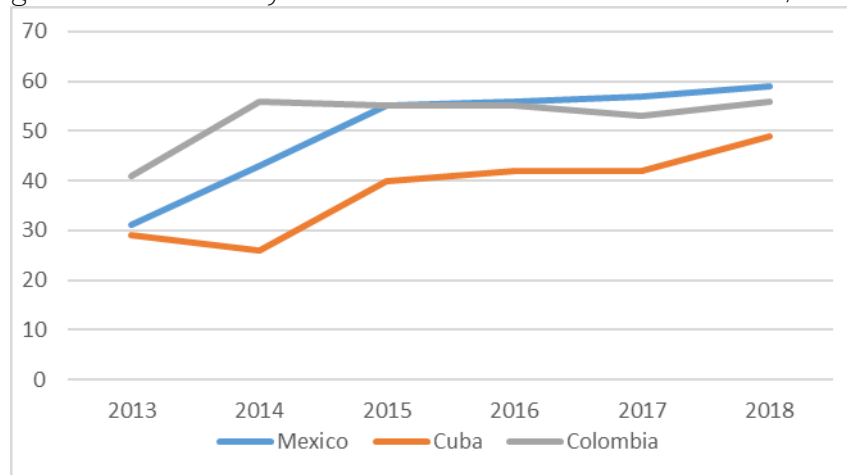
<sup>7</sup> Open Doors International. (2015). World Watch Research, World Watch List – Part 1. Retrieved from <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/World-Watch-List-2015-Report-Part-1-Ranking-background-articles-and-country-summaries.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Open Doors International. (2016). World Watch Research, World Watch List: Compilation 3, All WWL documents (not including country persecutions dynamics). Retrieved from <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/WWL-2016-Compilation-3-All-WWL-documents-not-including-Country-persecution-dynamics-Edition-2016-01-28.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Open Doors International. (2017). World Watch Research, World Watch List: Compilation 3, All WWL documents (except country profiles). Retrieved from <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/WWL-2017-Compilation-3-All-WWL-documents-not-including-country-persecution-dynamics-WWR.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Open Doors International. (2018). World Watch Research, World Watch List: Compilation Volume 1, All WWL documents (excluding country profile information). Retrieved from <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/WWL-2018-Compilation-1-All-main-documents-excluding-country-profiles-WWR.pdf>

Figure 2. WWL History Latin American countries 2013 -2018, scores



Source: Open Doors International (2018).

As can be observed, Colombia maintained a top 50 position in all observed editions of the WWL, as did Mexico since the WWL 2014. Colombia used to have a higher score than Mexico until the WWL 2015. Since the WWL 2014, the scores of both countries evolved within the 41-60 points range. Cuba has not been part of the top 50 of the WWL during the observed period, but experienced an increase in score from 29 points in 2013 to 49 points in 2018.

### 3. Prevalent persecution engines in Mexico, Colombia and Cuba

The WWL methodology distinguishes between eight “persecution engines” which “describe a distinct situation which is causing Christians to be persecuted either violently or non-violently”: Islamic oppression, Religious nationalism, Ethnic antagonism, Denominational protectionism, Communist and post-Communist oppression, Secular intolerance, Dictatorial paranoia and Organized corruption and crime.<sup>11</sup>

In the first two countries surveyed, Mexico and Colombia, the three prevalent persecution engines are, by order of importance:

#### 3.1 *Ethnic Antagonism (including Denominational protectionism)*

“This engine describes the persecution situation where communities and households are being forced to adhere to age-old indigenous customs established by tribes or ethnic people groups. There is a huge variety of groups here. The ‘mechanics’ of this engine is comparable to Islamic oppression and Religious nationalism - there often is a combination of a gradual building-up of pressure and incidental outright violence. An example of subtle pressure is when the authorities of an indigenous community in Myanmar or Mexico refuse to allow a Christian family’s children

<sup>11</sup> The following includes excerpts from the WWL methodology document.

to attend school. An example of outright violence is when Christian families are driven out a village because they do not want to participate in traditional ceremonies. The scope of this ‘ethnic movement’ is mainly subnational (part of territory of country) but can involve the crossing of national borders depending on the regional spread of the ethnic people groups.” It sometimes includes Denominational protectionism when converts to minority Christian denominations are persecuted in name of the majority Christian denomination, although there is often a ‘syncretistic’ element to how its religiosity is lived out.

### *3.2 Organized corruption and crime*

“This engine describes the persecution situation where groups or individuals are creating a climate of impunity, anarchy and corruption as a means for self-enrichment. It has two main ‘branches’: (i) corruption within state structures and (ii) corruption of society by organized crime. This engine expresses itself through a combination of systematic pressure caused by fear for violent repercussions in case of non-compliance, and by such violence. In Latin American countries such as Colombia and Mexico criminal groups (drugs, human trafficking etc.) use violence to keep the Church under control, especially at the level of the local community. At national level the interests of these groups are served by co-opting politicians and the security apparatus of the state.”

### *3.3 Secular Intolerance*

“This engine describes the situation where Christian faith is being forced out of the public domain, if possible even out of the hearts of people. Its drivers seek to transform societies into the shape of a new, radically secularist ethic. This new ethic is (partly) related to a radically new sexual agenda, with norms and values about sexuality, marriage and related issues that are alien to, and resisted by the Christian worldview. When Christian individuals or institutions try to resist this new ethic, they are opposed by (i) nondiscrimination legislation, (ii) attacks on parental rights in the area of education, (iii) the censorship of the Cross and other religious symbols from the public square, (iv) the use of various manifestations of “hate” speech laws to limit the freedom of expression, and (v) Church registration laws. Most of this is not violent, although arrests of pastors and lay people have happened. An example of this engine is compulsory sexual education based on gender ideology (including LGBTI insights) in nursery and primary schools in some countries, and the serious threat against parents who want to withdraw their young children from these lessons. The scope of this ‘secularist movement’ is global.”

In Cuba, the prevalent persecution engine is:

### 3.4 Communist and Post-communist oppression (blended with Dictatorial paranoia)

“This engine describes the situation where Christians are being persecuted and churches controlled by a state system that derives from Communist values. Key for controlling churches is a rigid system of state registration and monitoring. This system may still be in use in countries after the fall of Communism, as is the case in Central Asia. Although the engine relies on a combination of pressure and violence, the violence is often not particularly visible because the system’s hold on the church is complete and tight. An example is President Berdymukhamedov’s authoritarian government in Turkmenistan, where no religious activities beyond state-run and state-controlled institutions are allowed. However, extreme cases such as North Korea with its concentration camps do show high prevalence of violence against Christians. The scope of this ideological movement is national, although in the past it was global.” In the case of Cuba this engine is blended with Dictatorial paranoia because the communist ideology is imposed through a repressive authoritarian regime, as is generally the case.

## 4. Degrees of presence of persecution engines in Latin American countries

Based on the characteristics of the prevalent persecution engines in Mexico, Colombia and Cuba, proxy indicators were developed to determine the degree of presence of these persecution engines in other Latin American countries on a four-point scale (no presence, low, medium, high), following a specially designed “extrapolation method.” As Mexico, Colombia and Cuba are the highest scoring countries on the WWL, their scores were used as benchmarks for the other countries. The precise proxies that were used and the mechanisms followed to attribute the degree of presence of each persecution engine are documented in Annex A. Figure 3 summarizes our findings:

Figure 3. Degrees of presence of persecution engines in Latin American countries

Countries	Ethnic antagonism (including Denominational protectionism)	Organized corruption and crime	Communist and post-communist oppression (blended with Dictatorial paranoia)	Secular intolerance
Argentina		Medium		High
Belize	Medium	High		
Bolivia	High	Medium	Medium	Medium
Brazil	Medium	Medium		Medium
Chile	Medium			High
Colombia	High	High		High
Costa Rica				Medium
Cuba		Low	High*	High
Dominican		Medium		Low

Countries	Ethnic antagonism (including Denominational protectionism)	Organized corruption and crime	Communist and post-communist oppression (blended with Dictatorial paranoia)	Secular intolerance
<b>Republic</b>				
<b>Ecuador</b>	Low		Medium	Medium
<b>El Salvador</b>		High		Medium
<b>Guatemala</b>	High	High		Medium
<b>Guyana</b>		Medium		Low
<b>Haiti</b>	Medium	Medium		Low
<b>Honduras</b>	Low	High		Medium
<b>Mexico</b>	High*	High*		High*
<b>Nicaragua</b>			Medium	Medium
<b>Panama</b>	Low			Low
<b>Paraguay</b>		Low		Low
<b>Peru</b>	High	Low		Medium
<b>Uruguay</b>				High
<b>Venezuela</b>		Medium	Medium	Medium

\* Engine in highest scoring country to be used as benchmark in the extrapolation method.

Source: own elaboration.

## 5. Predicted WWL scores of Latin American countries

Using the scores per engine of the highest scoring countries as a benchmark, the degrees of presence of each persecution engine were used to build a basic statistical model to predict the scores of the Latin American countries that have not been submitted to a WWL list questionnaire.<sup>12</sup> Please refer to Annex A for the specific calculation method that was followed. The results of this predictive model are presented in figure 4.

Figure 4. Predicted scores of Latin American countries

	Country	Questionnaire score
1	Mexico	58.80
2	Colombia	56.40
3	Cuba	49.10
		<b>Predicted score</b>
4	Bolivia	45.41
5	Guatemala	44.00
6	Peru	42.59
7	Venezuela	37.89

<sup>12</sup> Methodologically, this approach is inspired by Stake (2000) and Yin (2003) who recommend that a first case is used as a kind of “pilot case” to refine the data collection instruments.

8	Honduras	35.99
9	Belize	34.74
10	El Salvador	33.60
11	Ecuador	32.94
12	Nicaragua	31.48
13	Brazil	31.07
14	Haiti	28.76
15	Chile	27.20
16	Guyana	22.16
17	Dominican Republic	22.16
18	Argentina	21.94
19	Uruguay	19.61
20	Panama	13.42
21	Costa Rica	12.76
22	Paraguay	11.23

Source: own elaboration.

The predicted scores may give a false perception of precision. They are only the outcomes of a very basic and rough model that is built on assumptions – which are based on generalizations to the whole region of the characteristics of Mexico, Colombia and Cuba – that could be falsified. Moreover, any macro level indicators are aggregates that conceal realities that can only be observed locally. In no time can they replace proper (field) research and the effort that is put into filling out and scoring the regular WWL questionnaires. The predicted scores should rather be viewed as a preliminary indication, an *ordre de grandeur*, of a hierarchy of countries in terms of persecution, which can inform research hypotheses.

Accordingly, a less presumptive presentation of the results of the extrapolation method would be to establish a grouping of Latin American countries in terms of the intensity of persecution. Figure 5 proposes to categorize the region into three groups of countries: countries with a high degree of persecution which includes countries that are predicted to score more than 35 points, countries with a medium degree of persecution (predicted scores between 25 and 35 points) and a low degree of persecution (predicted scores below 25 points).<sup>13</sup>

## 6. Towards a research agenda for Latin America

Although in the extrapolation method the determination of the degree of presence of the persecution engines is an intermediary step for the calculation of predicted WWL scores, it has intrinsic value, as it is a source of information that can serve to build research hypotheses, as each persecution engine in each national (and even subnational) context deserves to be explored separately. By combining the degrees of presence of persecution engines and the predicted scores per country, research priorities can be determined.

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<sup>13</sup> The labels “high”, “medium” and “low” are relative in comparison to other countries in the world.



In addition, transversal research topics taking the persecution engines as starting point can be imagined, such as the progression of Secular intolerance in the whole region. In addition, understanding the evolution of persecution engines may require the conduct of fieldwork at the subnational level to zoom in on specific communities.

Moreover, it can be expected that countries with more than one engine can be a bit more ‘chaotic’, i.e. it makes a difference if different persecution engines coexist in the same country.

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## Annex A – The extrapolation method

The “extrapolation method” is an instrument designed by the authors – advised by the Director of World Watch Research – to predict WWL scores for Latin American countries that have not been subject the standard WWL process. This method follows four steps:

*Step 1:* Establishment of the base squeeze score for each persecution engine according to the WWL 2018 regional results. To obtain this, the score of each block of the questionnaire was determined by a separate analysis of each persecution engine involved in the context of the country. The highest blocks were selected for each persecution engine and their sum gave the base squeeze score for each engine. The base squeeze score for each engine is the sum of the scores of the highest scoring blocks. The smash score was taken from the Violent Incidents Database of the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America.

*Step 2:* Definition of measurements for each persecution engine present in the Region (Organized corruption and crime, Ethnic antagonism, Secular intolerance, Communist and post-communism oppression blended with Dictatorial Paranoia). If direct measurements were not possible, we defined proxies. For example, the presence of organized crime can be measured by the homicide rate or the insight crime ranking.

*Step 3:* Analysis of each country according to those measures or proxies to establish the degree of presence of the engine in each country (low, medium or high) in comparison to the base squeeze score. For example, if the homicide rate was defined as a proxy for Organized corruption and crime, and it’s half of Mexico’s rate (the highest scoring country), then the degree of presence – considering that proxy – would be medium. Also, as since each proxy can indicate a different degree of presence, the average or majority degree is taken, depending on the case.

*Step 4:* Application of the following formula to predict the (approximate) squeeze score rate of each country in the Region:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Squeeze Score} = & (\text{Main engine} * \text{Base squeeze score for that engine} * \text{Degree of presence of that} \\ & \text{persecution engine}) + \\ & (\text{Secondary engine -if applicable} * \text{Base squeeze score for that engine} * \text{Degree} \\ & \text{of presence of that persecution engine} * 10\%) + \\ & (\text{Tertiary engine -if applicable} * \text{Base squeeze score for that engine} * \text{Degree of} \\ & \text{presence of that persecution engine} * 10\%) + \\ & (\text{Quaternary engine -if applicable} * \text{Base squeeze score for that engine} * \text{Degree} \\ & \text{of presence of that persecution engine} * 10\%) \end{aligned}$$

Degree of presence of each persecution engine: High=1; Medium=2/3; Low=1/3.

*Example:* Based on our analysis of Nicaragua, we established that the degree of presence of each persecution engine as follows: Communist and post-communism oppression: High; Secular intolerance: Medium. Therefore, the predicted squeeze score of the country is:

(Communist and post-communist oppression \* 45.08 \* 1.67 + (Secular intolerance \* 19.05 \*  
0.67 \* 10%)  
Squeeze Score for Nicaragua = 31.48

Variables used:

Base Squeeze Score for Communism and Post-Communism Oppression = 45.08

Base Squeeze Score for Secular Intolerance = 19.05

## Annex B – List of index/proxies used per persecution engine

<b>PERSECUTION ENGINE</b>	<b>PROXIES USED</b>
<b>ETHNIC ANTAGONISM</b>	% of Indigenous/ethnic Population; % of Indigenous Christians (proxy); Internal Legislation recognizing autonomy and self-determination; Internal legislation recognizing the importance of religious component in indigenous or native communities; known cases regarding persecution
<b>COMMUNIST AND POST-COMMUNIST OPRESSION BLENDED WITH DICTATORIAL PARANOIA</b>	Government Restriction Index; current communist/socialist party in power; activism of communist/socialist parties in the country; Freedom House; Press Freedom Index; known cases regarding persecution
<b>SECULAR INTOLERANCE</b>	Attempts of social claims or Lay State policies as an atheist State; social and political intervention of the LGTB Community in detriment of Christian values; intolerance/indifference to expressions or acts with religious content; Social Hostility Index; known cases regarding persecution
<b>ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME</b>	% of Church going Christians per country (proxy); Christians Homicide Rate (Proxy); Perception of Security Index; Corruption Perception Index; Latin American Countries most corrupted by Organized Crime; Ranking Violent Cities; Christians Kidnapping Rate (Proxy); presence of gangs.