
World Watch Research

Bhutan: Persecution Dynamics

December 2024



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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World Watch List 2025 – Top 50

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2025	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	98	96	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.7	11.1	94	93	92	91	92
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.6	94	89	89	88	87
4	Libya	16.0	16.2	15.9	16.2	16.4	10.6	91	91	88	91	92
5	Sudan	14.1	14.2	15.5	14.9	15.3	16.1	90	87	83	79	79
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.9	12.2	89	89	89	88	88
7	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.6	14.9	14.5	16.7	88	88	88	87	85
8	Pakistan	13.6	13.9	15.0	15.0	12.9	16.7	87	87	86	87	88
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.9	16.5	10.9	86	86	86	85	86
10	Afghanistan	15.6	15.9	15.9	16.4	16.7	5.0	85	84	84	98	94
11	India	12.2	12.9	13.3	14.9	13.9	16.5	84	83	82	82	83
12	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.8	16.6	3.3	81	81	80	81	78
13	Myanmar	12.6	11.1	13.5	14.1	12.9	16.5	81	79	80	79	74
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	13.0	15.2	15.6	80	79	76	70	67
15	China	13.2	10.1	12.8	14.6	16.1	11.1	78	78	77	76	74
16	Maldives	15.6	15.3	13.7	15.8	16.5	0.7	78	78	77	77	77
17	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.3	14.8	13.9	6.1	78	79	76	78	82
18	Syria	13.5	14.4	13.9	14.4	14.3	7.0	78	81	80	78	81
19	Algeria	14.7	14.3	11.5	14.7	16.0	6.3	77	79	73	71	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	14.0	15.6	76	75	71	68	67
21	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.6	12.9	14.3	8.3	74	71	69	69	67
22	Laos	11.8	10.7	13.5	14.1	13.9	9.8	74	75	68	69	71
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	2.8	74	72	72	70	71
24	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.7	11.3	10.4	16.1	74	71	69	68	67
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.5	12.4	15.5	4.4	73	71	71	71	71
26	Cuba	13.2	8.5	13.9	13.3	15.1	9.1	73	73	70	66	62
27	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	14.0	15.6	72	70	70	68	66
28	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	14.6	15.7	72	71	70	68	62

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2025	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021
29	Turkmenistan	14.3	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.3	1.5	71	70	70	69	70
30	Nicaragua	12.4	7.6	13.7	13.3	14.1	9.6	71	70	65	56	51
31	Mexico	11.7	9.0	12.5	11.8	11.0	14.6	71	68	67	65	64
32	Oman	14.5	14.1	10.9	13.8	14.1	3.0	70	69	65	66	63
33	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	15.6	70	69	66	66	65
34	Tunisia	12.4	13.2	10.1	12.6	13.8	8.1	70	69	67	66	67
35	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	10.8	14.5	16.1	70	67	67	66	64
36	Bhutan	13.2	13.2	12.3	14.1	14.2	2.2	69	68	66	67	64
37	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.9	68	68	68	65	63
38	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.6	12.2	12.8	14.2	4.3	68	65	65	64	64
39	Tajikistan	14.1	12.7	12.7	13.2	13.7	1.9	68	66	66	65	66
40	Egypt	12.7	13.7	12.1	12.4	10.9	6.3	68	68	68	71	75
41	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.7	67	67	68	74	67
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	2.6	67	66	66	63	62
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.4	13.1	16.1	67	66	65	65	64
44	Vietnam	10.8	9.5	12.2	14.1	14.1	5.9	67	68	70	71	72
45	Turkey	13.0	11.7	11.7	13.2	11.5	5.4	67	64	66	65	69
46	Colombia	11.0	7.9	12.7	11.5	10.5	12.6	66	68	71	68	67
47	Kyrgyzstan	13.5	10.3	11.7	11.4	12.4	6.9	66	59	59	58	58
48	Brunei	14.8	14.8	10.8	10.8	14.0	0.6	66	66	65	64	64
49	Chad	11.0	8.2	10.2	9.9	10.3	15.9	65	61	58	55	53
50	Jordan	12.9	14.3	10.4	12.2	12.8	2.4	65	65	65	66	64

World Watch List 2025 – Ranks 51-78

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2025	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021
51	Malaysia	12.8	13.7	11.7	12.4	11.2	3.0	65	64	66	63	63
52	Azerbaijan	13.3	10.2	9.6	12.2	13.7	5.6	65	60	59	60	56
53	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.9	64	63	64	63	62
54	Nepal	12.2	10.6	9.5	12.6	12.3	5.9	63	62	61	64	66
55	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.4	63	62	63	61	58
56	Russian Federation	12.7	7.9	10.7	13.1	14.1	4.4	63	58	57	56	57
57	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.1	1.7	61	61	60	59	56
58	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	61	64	64	63
59	Indonesia	10.9	11.9	10.9	11.6	10.2	5.7	61	66	68	68	63
60	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.6	61	61	62	62	62
61	Sri Lanka	12.7	8.7	11.5	11.5	8.5	7.6	60	60	57	63	62
62	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	10.3	10.7	12.1	0.2	60	60	60	59	58
63	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	14.6	59	57	55	52	48
64	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	12.1	9.4	58	58	57	50	42
65	Honduras	7.9	4.7	11.7	7.3	9.9	13.1	55	55	53	48	46
66	Togo	9.2	6.7	10.4	7.1	11.5	9.3	54	52	49	44	43
67	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	0.6	54	55	55	57	56
68	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	8.9	54	52	48	43	47
69	Ukraine	6.8	5.0	7.8	12.5	13.5	7.2	53	44	37	37	34
70	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	8.3	53	52	52	51	46
71	Venezuela	6.3	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	9.6	52	53	56	51	39
72	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	16.1	52	52	51	48	47
73	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	9.6	51	44	44	42	42
74	Lebanon	11.5	10.1	7.0	6.2	6.7	7.2	49	48	40	35	34
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	4.4	48	47	44	44	43
76	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	8.1	15.6	47	46	46	43	43

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2025	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021
77	Belarus	9.9	3.7	5.0	10.8	14.1	3.1	47	46	43	33	30
78	Philippines	9.2	6.6	6.6	6.1	5.7	8.5	43	40	32	34	26

Copyright, sources and definitions

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- [Background country information](#) (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

These documents are the property of World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. They include data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and 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 end of each document under the heading “External links”. These documents may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © Open Doors International.

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/>.

Reporting period

The WWL 2025 reporting period was 1 October 2023 - 30 September 2024.

Brief country details

Bhutan: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
792,000	18,800	2.4

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Bhutan: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	18,800	2.4
Muslim	1,900	0.2
Hindu	90,800	11.5
Buddhist	655,000	82.7
Ethnic religionist	25,800	3.3
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	110	0.0
Atheist	0	0.0
Agnostic	230	0.0
Other	0	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Map of country



Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Bhutan: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Religious nationalism	Government officials, One's own (extended) family, Non-Christian religious leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Political parties

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

Brief description of the persecution situation

All Bhutanese citizens are expected to follow Buddhism. Christians have to make unofficial arrangements for meeting and are technically forced to worship illegally, since no Christian congregation has ever been allowed to build a church structure. Converts to Christianity will be watched with suspicion and efforts are usually made to bring them back to their former religion. Buddhist monks (or other religious leaders), the local community and family often cooperate in this. Christians are also mocked and singled out in social media. Apart from converts, many Christians come from the Nepalese minority. Local authorities often refuse to issue known Christians with a 'non-objection certificate' which is needed for loan applications, registering property, applying for jobs and the renewal of ID cards.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

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

1. [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW)
2. [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC)

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

- Christian children are forced to receive Buddhist religious education and to participate in religious ceremonies and festivals that are not in line with their religious beliefs (CRC Art. 14)
- Christian female converts run the risk of being forcibly married to non-Christian men (CEDAW Art. 16)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

Due to security concerns, no specific examples can be published here.

Specific examples of positive developments

None

Christian communities and how they are affected

- **Communities of expatriate Christians:** The very few expatriate Christians can only obtain a limited visa and are not able to join the existing house-churches. They are therefore involuntarily isolated and scored as a separate WWL category.

- **Historical Christian communities:** In the 19th century, a small Roman Catholic presence existed under the Indian diocese of Darjeeling, and this is still present today. They are tolerated to a certain extent, as they tend to keep to themselves. However, they lack official recognition and are subject to discrimination just like all other Christian denominations. The church is small and received its [first indigenous priest](#) in 2019 (UCA News, 10 December 2019).
- **Converts to Christianity:** Converts from a Buddhist, Hindu or ethnic background face strong pressure from family, friends and neighbors to return to Buddhism, Hinduism and/or the traditional Bön faith. They not only face the discrimination all Christians in the country have to deal with, but they also have to cope with the constant pressure being exerted on them to make them return to their family's faith.
- **Non-traditional Christian communities:** These groups include Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations. Fellowships such as Brethren and El Shaddai exist, but none are recognized and are therefore prone to experiencing conflict with the authorities. This can be in the form of monitoring, but raids or even occasional arrests occur as well.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

There are no geographical hotspots of persecution in Bhutan.

Position on the World Watch List

Bhutan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2025	69	36
WWL 2024	68	36
WWL 2023	66	40
WWL 2022	67	34
WWL 2021	64	43

In the WWL 2025 reporting period, the overall score rose by 1 point to 69 points. However, the violence score remained the same as in WWL 2024, and the average pressure only rose by 0.2 points, so the situation for Christians has remained very much the same. Pressure remains extreme in the *Church* and *National spheres of life* and very high in all other spheres of life, indicating how the Christian minority continues to be side-lined in everyday life and lacking official recognition. Converts are not recognized in society and are therefore often shunned by fellow citizens and denied official documents by the authorities. Children of Christians also often experience discrimination at school.

Persecution engines

Bhutan: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Not at all
Religious nationalism	RN	Very strong
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Weak
Clan oppression	CO	Weak
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Not at all
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.

Religious nationalism - Buddhist (Very strong)

Bhutan was a Buddhist kingdom for centuries and the continuing emphasis on Mahayana Buddhism as the country's spiritual heritage makes life hard for the Christian minority. Even after introducing a constitutional monarchy in 2001 and installing democratic elections with the new Constitution in 2008, the country continues to give a dominant role to Buddhism. Under Article 3(1) of the Constitution, "Buddhism is the spiritual heritage of Bhutan", which promotes amongst other things "the principles and values of peace, non-violence, compassion and tolerance". Additionally, it says that "it is the responsibility of all religious institutions and personalities to promote the spiritual heritage of the country".

Buddhism is thus not explicitly defined as the state religion. Instead, the Constitution defines Bhutan as a secular state and affirms religious tolerance. This is, however, stronger on paper than in reality. Buddhism is heavily incorporated into people's daily lives and is strongly evident in the political, social, cultural and even economic activities of the country. An illustration of this close relationship can be seen in the so-called "dzongs". These are administrative centers with one department for political administration and another for the religious authorities and often includes a Buddhist temple and accommodation for monks.

No Christian congregation has ever been allowed to build a church structure; all Christian fellowships are forced therefore to make unofficial arrangements for meeting. Especially in rural areas, Buddhist monks oppose the presence of Christians; the authorities do nothing to protect Christians and most officials tend to side with the monks. However, the difficulties for Christians lie not just with the authorities and monks supporting the dominance of Buddhism. In the case of converts to Christianity, neighbors, friends and their own families can become another and even stronger source of pressure.

Drivers of persecution

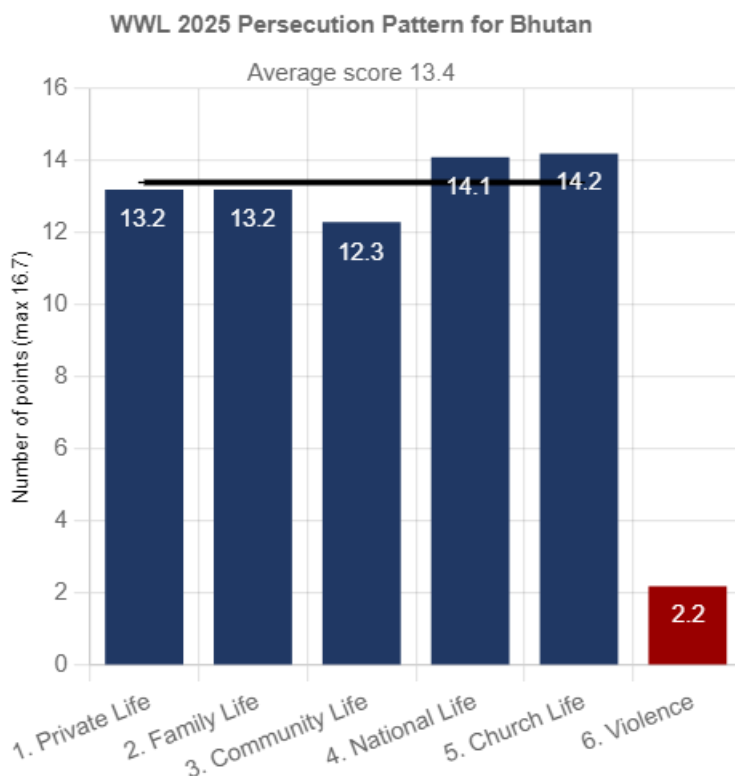
Bhutan: Drivers of Persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG								
Government officials	Very strong								
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong								
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Medium								
One's own (extended) family	Very strong								
Political parties	Medium								

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

Drivers of Religious nationalism - Buddhist

- **Government officials (Very strong) and Political parties (Medium):** Government officials from the local to the national level will do whatever they see as necessary for preserving the country's Buddhist heritage. Many officials are heavily influenced by Buddhist monks and there is a longstanding practice of monks working in and for the government. In rural areas, even retired government officials wield a large influence, which they can use against Christians. Christians face difficulties to even receive a hearing when bringing requests to the authorities or obtain necessary documents, such as a 'non-objection certificate'. All political parties back the government policy of preserving and protecting Buddhism.
- **Extended family (Very strong):** For converts to Christianity, it is their family who usually become the strongest driver of persecution. Conversion is unacceptable and brings shame upon the family. The family will do its best to bring the convert back to his or her original faith. If everything fails, converts are disowned by their families. As life in Bhutan is very communal and the proximity and protection of the family is important, being disowned is felt very strongly by converts.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** Buddhist leaders see themselves first and foremost as preservers of Bhutan's Buddhist culture and heritage (just as Hindu leaders do for the Hindu minority). They make a point of being deeply involved in every day life and put strong pressure on converts to reconvert.
- **Citizens (Medium):** Christians in general are perceived as being 'newcomers' and a disturbance. Especially in the rural areas, society is closely-knit and any deviation is perceived as wrong and as disrupting the harmony. Therefore, not only family members put pressure on converts, but also friends, neighbors and work colleagues as well. Additionally, Christians have to be very cautious when gathering to avoid any neighbors complaining or taking action against them.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2025 Persecution pattern for Bhutan shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Bhutan is very high and even increased very slightly from 13.2 points in WWL 2024 to 13.4 points.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Church* and *National spheres of life* (at an extreme level) but is also very high in the remaining three spheres of life. Pressure on converts is especially strong in the *Private* and *Family spheres*, while all categories of Christian communities face pressure in the *National* and *Church spheres*. This pressure is fueled by the Christian minority continuing to be side-lined in everyday life and lacking official recognition.
- The score for violence against Christians stayed at 2.2 points, the same as in WWL 2024. Although this score is low, the occurrence of violent incidents causes the Christian minority to behave with extra caution and self-censorship.

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 2025 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 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (3.50 points)

Since Christian faith is not officially recognized by the government, displaying Christian symbols in public or even in private homes can provoke suspicion and harassment. Wearing a cross or making use of Christian artwork would be seen as a form of promoting Christianity and - in rural areas in particular - the local community would oppose this strongly.

Block 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (3.25 points)

Owning Bibles, Christian literature and CDs/DVDs can be seen as evidence of promoting Christianity (which is not officially recognized) or of attempting to convert others, which is illegal. If discovered by family, authorities or neighbors, this can lead to harassment, interrogation and confiscation of belongings.

Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (3.25 points)

Bhutanese authorities closely monitor online activities, and any open expression of Christian faith is likely to be seen as promoting Christianity or attempting to convert others, which is illegal in the country. Hence, Christians who post religious content on social media risk being targeted by the authorities and may also face backlash from the local community, including threats, or even legal consequences. As a result, many Christians in Bhutan self-censor and avoid discussing religious beliefs online.

Block 1.6: It has been risky for Christians to access Christian radio or TV, or Christian material on the Internet. (3.25 points)

Listening to Christian radio, watching Christian TV programs, or browsing Christian websites (e.g. YouTube) can potentially expose individuals to scrutiny from the authorities and can have serious consequences if it is perceived as an attempt to convert others or engage in proselytization.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (4.00 points)

Baptism is seen as the ultimate proof of conversion, which is banned according to Section 463 (A) of the country's Penal Code. Therefore, baptisms always have to be carried out in secret, away from the eyes of the authorities and non-Christian religious leaders.

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (4.00 points)

Christians are often treated as outsiders and not welcomed or supported by their neighbors. This affects the children of a Christian family, too, for instance in the way non-Christian families refer to them in a derogatory manner and prevent their children from visiting a Christian friend's home, fearing they might be exposed to Christian activities. Children of Christian parents often face harassment and bullying at school, with their peers claiming they are unworthy of being Bhutanese citizens.

Block 2.13: Christians have lost their inheritance rights because of their conversion to Christianity or (if a person already was a Christian) other types of Christianity. (2.75 points)

Despite government regulations ensuring equal inheritance, Buddhist families often resist this in the case of a Christian convert. For instance, a converted family member may receive low-quality or infertile land or be completely excluded from inheritance. An example from East Bhutan in 2024: A Christian convert lost her husband in an accident. She went to live at her parent's house but was thrown out for being a Christian and disowned, with the family refusing her any share of the ancestral property. This was after the family had reported her to the police and burned her Bible.

Block 2.11: Spouses of converts have been put under pressure (successfully or unsuccessfully) by others to divorce. (2.50 points)

When a spouse converts to Christianity, it can create significant conflict within a marriage, especially in a predominantly Buddhist or Hindu society. If the spouse and family do not accept the conversion, it can easily result in separation or divorce.

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.). (3.75 points)

Neighbors and community members are frequently responsible for reporting to the authorities if Christian activities have been taking place at certain locations. Bhutanese police and CID officials discreetly gather intelligence, often posing as uninvolved individuals, while keeping a close watch on Christian communities. Many churches have reported such persons regularly attending church services to monitor activities and collect data. Phones and emails of some leading Christians are also monitored, and printing equipment has also been inspected to prevent the distribution of Christian materials.

Block 3.9: Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education). (3.75 points)

Children require a letter of recommendation from the village head or from the local government office in order to be admitted to schools. Christians often have difficulty in obtaining such letters. And if they succeed, their children often face discrimination in school, not least because all pupils are expected to learn and enact Buddhist faith and prayers. Also, Buddhist and Hindu students tend to be given priority over Christians when applying for sponsorships and further studies abroad, even if Christian pupils have achieved higher grades.

Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.75 points)

Since many jobs require government licenses or a non-objection certificate (NOC), Christians tend to hide their faith for obtaining these. Most employers are anyway biased against Christians and many will bypass them when they apply for employment or promotion. There have also been reports of Christians being dismissed due to their Christian faith becoming known.

Block 3.7: Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith. (3.50 points)

Converts and Christians from a non-traditional church community experience this most. If community members find out about a new conversion in a family, they will begin exerting pressure on that person to recant immediately. It is not long before the authorities are informed and if they then refuse to return to their original faith, they will be threatened with the loss of government benefits and citizenship cards.

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. (4.00 points)**

In the Constitution, Mahayana Buddhism is treated as the state religion. On 24 May 2011, the government enacted an amendment to the law and inserted an anti-conversion clause. Section 463 (A) of the Penal Code (Amendment) Act of Bhutan 2011 states: "The offense of compelling others to belong to another faith shall be a misdemeanor", which is punishable by a sentence of up to three years in prison. These provisions - together with the fact that no Christian groups have been officially recognized - limit the possibility of Christian communities practicing their faith openly.

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

Since Christian faith is not officially recognized by the authorities, Christians do not publicly speak out, identifying as Christians. Most will self-censor and keep their faith-based views to themselves.

Block 4.10: Media reporting has been incorrect or biased against Christians. (3.50 points)

Christianity is generally ignored in mainstream media, but whenever it has been mentioned, reports seem to focus on negative aspects such as converting vulnerable people. For instance, an article by [Kuensel Online](#) published on 4 March 2020 stated: "For decades, a big concern among the people, especially those in southern Bhutan, was that the harmony within their small communities could be seriously affected by attempts at large-scale conversion by some Christian groups. These groups were alleged to coerce people by offering money or promising economic opportunities. Many vulnerable groups have believed and had forgone a religion passed down from their ancestors."

Block 4.13: Christians have been accused of blasphemy or insulting the majority religion, either by state authorities or by pressure groups. (3.50 points)

Court cases or similar proceedings are rare, but insulting Buddhism is a common accusation against Christians of all categories of Christian communities in Bhutan. A country researcher mentioned the case of a Christian being punished for not bowing down in front of a Buddhist altar at a promotion ceremony. Such faith-based behavior can quickly make Christians appear as traitors with no respect for king, country or Constitution.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere**Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (4.00 points)**

Known house-churches are always watched by members of the local community. Intelligence officers also visit services and Christian leaders from time to time, asking details about the church gatherings

and on the lookout for any conversions taking place. If there is evidence of conversions, they will interrogate the responsible church leader more intensively and possibly put pressure on the homeowners to stop such gatherings taking place. Villagers are also known to throw barrages of stones at homes where services are in progress.

Block 5.11: Pastors or other Christian leaders (or their family members) have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)

House-church leaders carry responsibility for Christian activities and face particular harassment when there is a church raid and house-search. They are then likely to be held under special surveillance both by police and local Buddhist monks.

Block 5.14: Openly selling or distributing Bibles (or other Christian materials) has been hindered. (4.00 points)

Any attempt to sell or distribute Christian materials openly can result in severe consequences, including arrest. The importing of such materials is also heavily restricted by the authorities. These factors underscore the difficulties Christians face in accessing and sharing religious materials in the country.

Block 5.6: Work among youth in particular has been restricted. (3.00 points)

As no churches have ever been officially recognized, such activity cannot be carried out in the open. If youth are found participating in or learning about Christianity, there is a risk of group leaders being arrested on charges of proselytizing.

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.*

3. The use of symbolic numbers:

- In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

4. The symbol “x” in the table:

- This denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security concerns.

Bhutan: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2025	WWL 2024
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	x	x
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?	x	x
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	x	x
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?	x	x
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	x	x
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	x	x

Bhutan: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2025	WWL 2024
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	x	x
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	x	x
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?	x	x
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?	x	x
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	x	x
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	x	x

Persecution in Bhutan has never been particularly violent, since the authorities prefer to use other, less visible means against Christians. In the WWL 2025 reporting period, the same violence score was reached as in WWL 2024 - a 'low level' (2.2 points). For security reasons, no details can be provided.

5 Year trends

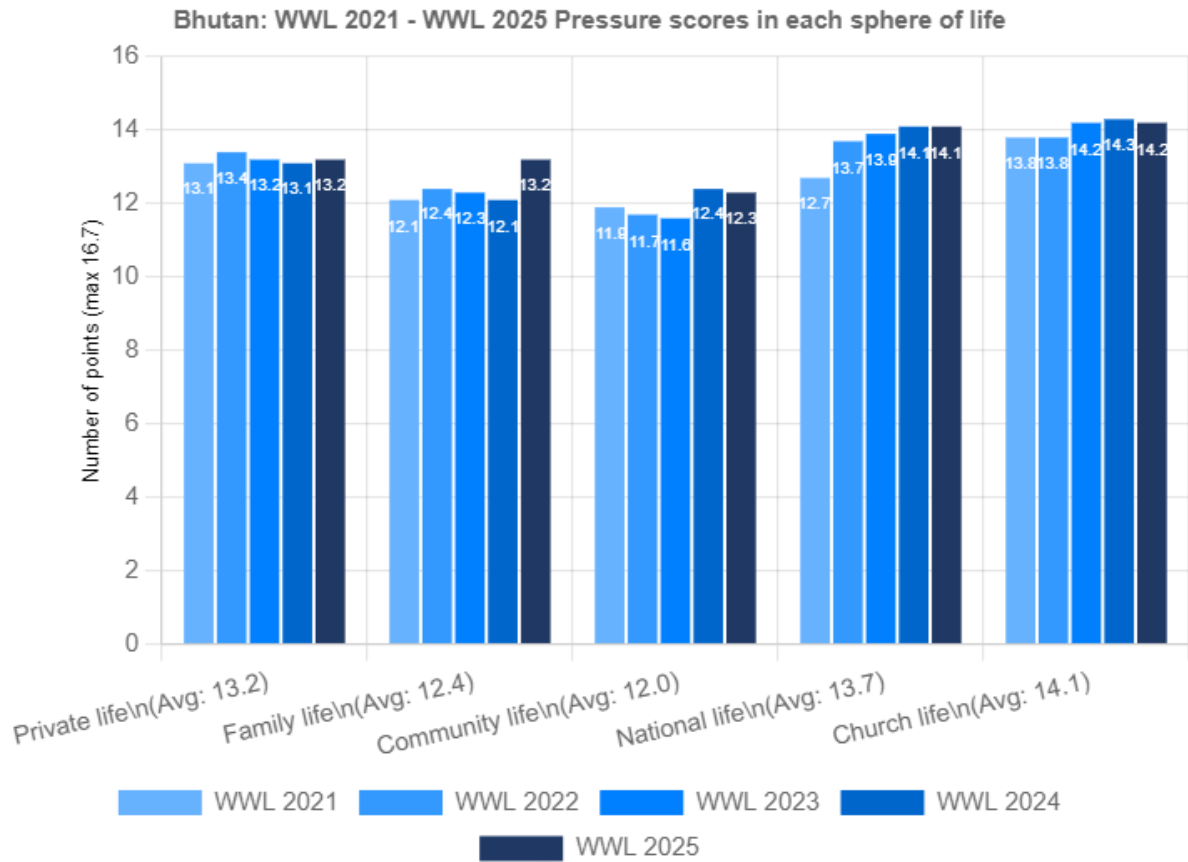
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Bhutan: WWL 2021 - WWL 2025	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2025	13.4
2024	13.2
2023	13.0
2022	13.0
2021	12.7

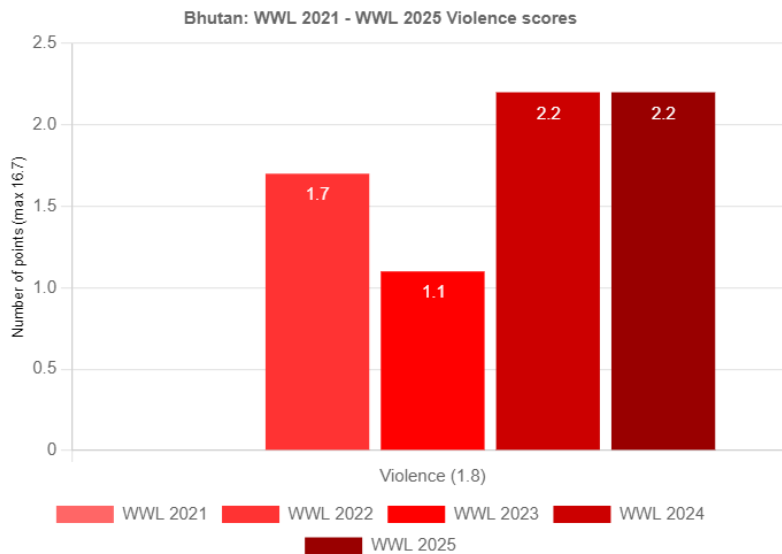
In the last 5 WWL reporting periods, average pressure has seen a gentle rise from 12.7 points in WWL 2021 to 13.4 points in WWL 2025.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



During the last five WWL reporting periods, the pressure on Christians in *Church life* has on average been highest, followed by *National* and *Private life*. In WWL 2025, pressure increased most in the *Family sphere*.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



Persecution has never been particularly violent in Bhutan and the score has usually been (very) low - even zero in WWL 2021. In the WWL 2024 and WWL 2025 reporting periods, there were more reports of violent incidents recorded than before, which may indicate the beginning of a new trend.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Bhutan	Female Pressure Points Most frequently recorded PPs: WWL 2019 - WWL 2024
	<p>Denied inheritance or possessions</p> <p>Forced divorce</p> <p>Forced marriage</p>

While society in Bhutan is traditionally matriarchal, and Bhutanese women do not have to contend with institutionalized forms of discrimination, female Christians are vulnerable to pressure for their faith, particularly from their families and local communities (Verma Priyadarshini, "Women in Bhutan: Exploring their socio-cultural status in the late 20th century", Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, Volume 75 [2014], pp. 920-927). As a country expert comments: “[W]hile legally women are given equal rights as men, in practice there is discrimination, especially for those from a Hindu background.”

Christian women who convert from Hinduism or Buddhism to Christianity are at the greatest risk of persecution, typically through being emotionally abused by their families or divorced by their husbands. A divorce is relatively easy to procure in Bhutan, increasing the fear among female converts that their husbands might decide to leave them. Forced divorce remains an ongoing risk for converts. A country expert shares that, due to polygamous practices, “the unbelieving spouse will just marry another person,” exacerbating the fear that female converts may be left or sidelined by their husbands. Christian women married to non-Christians are also socially under pressure to stay with their husbands, even in situations of ongoing domestic abuse. Furthermore, whenever Christian women are married to a non-Christian and do not want to convert (e.g., to Buddhism), they can in some instances face intense pressure from their husband and/or husband's family to convert in order to avoid the shame of a divorce.

Forced marriage is also a risk for Christian converts in Bhutan. Single converts, especially young women, fear being pressured into marriage with a non-Christian.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Bhutan	Male Pressure Points Most frequently recorded PPs: WWL 2019 - WWL 2024
	<p>Denied inheritance or possessions</p> <p>Economic harassment via business/job/work access</p>

Although men and women enjoy equal rights under the law, traditional matriarchal society means that there is still preference in practice for inheritance and land ownership to pass down the female line ([World Bank, Bhutan Gender Policy Note, 2013](#)). In this context, Christian men and boys can experience persecution through being disowned by their family or asked to leave the family home. They will likely experience strong pressure from their peers and local community, compounding the sense of isolation and rejection. They further experience pressure in the workplace. A country expert explains that Christian men may face “difficulty in seeking gainful employment”. When male Christians lose their job or are excluded from the traditional way of farming, the entire family is affected by the economic loss as he is typically the financial provider.

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Bhutan](#)):

- "The government continued to provide financial assistance for the construction of Buddhist temples and shrines as well as funding for Buddhist monks and monasteries. Some courts and other government institutions remained housed in or adjacent to Buddhist monasteries. Some religious groups said government ceremonies continued to involve mandatory Buddhist prayer rituals. The government continued to recognize significant Buddhist and Hindu religious holidays as public holidays. The government did not recognize any Christian holidays as public holidays. Members of the Hindu Dharmic Samudaya continued to cite strong official support for Hindu religious practice."

Lhotshampas, who live in Bhutan but are of Nepalese descent, are a mostly-Hindu group, predominantly based in the southern lowlands of the country. They comprise an estimated 33% of the population of Bhutan. They have been [victims of severe discrimination](#) and persecution by the state in recent decades, but not just by Bhutan alone (World Atlas, last accessed 8 November 2024). A country expert explains:

- "The Nepalese government passed citizenship laws that provided a legal basis for declaring many Lhotshampa to be ‘non-nationals.’ In addition, those Lhotshampa that remained in Nepal continued to suffer routine discrimination, arbitrary detention and restricted access to education and employment. The Nepalese government considers Bhutanese refugees in urban settings to be illegal residents, and they are liable to pay fines or be detained. There are numerous other ethnic groups present in Bhutan on a much smaller scale including Adivasis, Birmi, Brokpa, Doya, Lepcha, Tibetans and Toktop. As a result in part of the ‘One nation, one people’ policy of assimilationist policies enforcing the traditions of the dominant Drukpa Buddhist elite on all members of the Bhutanese population, many of these minorities found themselves stripped of citizenship’s rights and so unable to access education, employment, health care or housing. This policy affected their rights as religious minorities as well."

Trends Summary

1) The government is introducing greater civil freedoms selectively

The Bhutanese government’s explanation about the registration of religious groups not being a prerequisite for practice (stated before the UN Human Rights Council in September 2019) has not yet translated into less pressure on Christians on the ground. It seems that the authorities fear that greater

civil freedoms might result in divisions and unrest within the country. Nevertheless, some changes have been taking place, as illustrated by the government's move to decriminalize homosexuality.

The country's continued dependence on tourism also means constant exposure to outside influence. This could possibly lead to more organized opposition by those wanting to preserve Bhutanese culture and religion (see also below: *Trend #3*). Due to the country's geostrategic vulnerability, the danger is that such unrest could be exploited by foreign forces.

2) Bhutan continues to face bullying from China

Bhutan is a tiny land-locked country sandwiched between China and India. Whereas China has made direct inroads into Bhutan to increase its influence in recent years, India has many more traditional ties with the country. The balancing act of keeping a good relationship with both giants and of benefitting from their assistance without being swallowed up by them, is continuing. The Chinese inroads became very visible from 2021 onwards, when it became evident that China had built a whole village and infrastructure on [Bhutanese territory](#) (Foreign Policy, 7 May 2021). Further construction continued in the WWL 2025 reporting period. As Foreign Policy reported, the territory is of great religious importance to Bhutan and the real goal of the Communist rulers might be to pressurize Bhutan into ceding disputed terrain in a region referred to as the 'Chicken neck'. This lies much closer to India and is a strategically important area on the Doklam Plateau where China and India had a standoff in 2017. Time will tell if Bhutan's alleged [tilt towards China](#) is real, and if so what the consequences will be (South China Morning Post, 29 October 2023). The increased trade and transit ties with Bangladesh may also be read against this geostrategic background.

3) Bhutan fears increasing Western influence

Bhutan's biggest fear is arguably that it is losing its traditionally strong Buddhist culture to an increasing Western influence. There is already a notable drop in enrollments to monastic institutions which might indicate that Buddhism is losing significance. This would be a severe threat to the country's culture and tradition. Therefore, there are calls to move into the future and not be lulled into a false sense of comfort by the "[phenomenal achievements](#)" wrought by the country's forefathers (Bhutan Times, 20 June 2022).

An increased emphasis on Buddhist traditions in celebrating festivals, such as [banning](#) meat and alcohol (The Print, 17 March 2023), can also be read as an effort to strengthen traditional culture. Such a trend could have both positive and negative effects on religious freedom in the country and is closely connected to Trend #1 above. On the negative side: If this trend continues, the state might take measures to re-assert the dominance of cultural and traditional norms to safeguard the Buddhist heritage of the country. Such a reaction would adversely affect any efforts by Christians in the country seeking official recognition. On the positive side: If Buddhism is losing significance in Bhutanese society, this might eventually lead to both state and society adopting a more tolerant approach towards other religious groups in the country.

In the near future, however, it seems unlikely that the Christian community in Bhutan will enjoy the freedom it is hoping for. The future of the Christian minority will continue to be determined by how *Religious nationalism* develops (the country's main Persecution engine).

Further useful reports

Further background information per country and 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/wwl-background/>
- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

External Links

- Copyright, sources and definitions: Background country information - <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-background/>
- 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>
- Christian communities and how they are affected: first indigenous priest - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Fr-Kinley-Tshering-is-Bhutan%E2%80%99s-first-priest-following-a-meeting-with-Mother-Teresa-48777.html>
- Block 4.10: Media reporting has been incorrect or biased against Christians. (3.50 points): Kuensel Online - <https://kuenselonline.com/choosing-our-own-faith/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: matriarchal - <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44158477>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: World Bank, Bhutan Gender Policy Note, 2013 - <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/960591468017989867/bhutan-gender-policy-note>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: IRFR 2023 Bhutan - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bhutan/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: victims of severe discrimination - <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/who-are-the-lhotshampa-people.html>
- Trends Summary: Bhutanese territor - <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/07/china-bhutan-border-villages-security-forces/>
- Trends Summary: y - <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/07/china-bhutan-border-villages-security-forces/>
- Trends Summary: tilt towards China - <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3239549/why-bhutans-tilt-towards-china-may-significantly-change-regional-dynamics>
- Trends Summary: phenomenal achievements - <https://bhutantimes.bt/index.php/2022/06/20/bhutan-moves-into-the-future/>
- Trends Summary: banning - <https://theprint.in/world/bhutan-sale-of-meat-items-at-annual-tshechu-and-religious-events-banned/1451190/>