

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

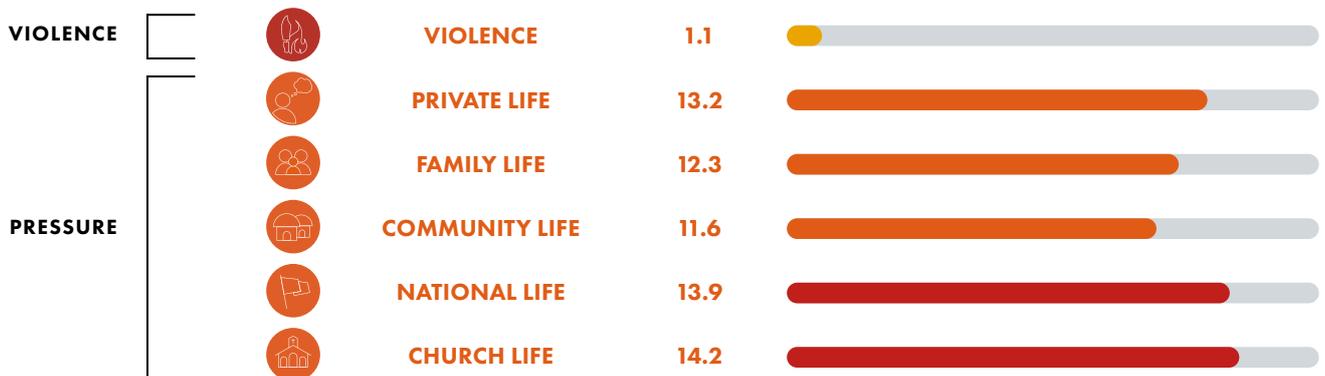
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**40**

## Bhutan



### LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

## Key findings

All Bhutanese citizens are expected to follow Buddhism. Converts to Christianity will be watched with suspicion, and efforts are usually made by family and community to bring them back to their former religion. Besides converts, many Christians come from the Nepalese minority. No churches have official state recognition, which means that Christians are technically worshipping illegally. Local authorities often refuse to issue Christians with a non-objection certificate which is needed for loan applications, registering property, applying for jobs and the renewal of ID cards.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck

### POPULATION

788,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

18,800<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Buddhism

### GOVERNMENT

Constitutional Monarchy



©Unsplash

## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	18,800	2.4
Buddhists	647,000	82.1
Hindus	92,900	11.8
Ethno-religionists	27,100	3.4

Source<sup>2</sup>

A constitutional monarchy, the king is young, popular and regarded as the guardian of Buddhism. Under the National Security Act 1992, it is treason to speak against the king, people, or country and anyone guilty can be jailed. Bhutan is a very small country, bordering the two most populous countries in the world, China and India. China has also been building village infrastructure on another part of [Bhutanese territory](#), thus tacitly claiming ownership of land for the Tibet Autonomous Region. This position requires wisdom in balancing foreign relations, although traditionally ties with India have always been stronger. Bhutan has so far avoided offending China.

All citizens are expected to follow Buddhism. Deviants are regarded with suspicion and become social pariahs. Most Christians come from a Nepalese background, many of whom are living in the south. During the country's UN Universal Periodic Review in 2019, the government [stated](#) that, "Registration of a religious organization is not a prerequisite for practice," but Christians still have not been given legal

status. Christian groups are able to meet but must do so without raising any attention. Churches that applied for registration have continued to await approval from the government's Commission for Religious Organizations (CRO). Bhutan's economy heavily relies on tourism. After the COVID-19 pandemic, the country re-opened for international tourists from September 2021. However, the daily amount those tourists are obliged to spend increased from 70 to 200 USD, potentially limiting the number of tourist arrivals.



<sup>1</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

<sup>2</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021) (*Adapted according to OD-estimate*)

## How the situation varies by region

There are no hotspots where more violations are experienced.

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

There are very few expat Christians, and they are not able to join house churches.

### Historical Christian communities

The small number of Roman Catholics are tolerated but the Roman Catholic Church lacks official recognition and is subject to discrimination.

### Converts to Christianity

Converts from a Buddhist, Hindu, or ethnic background face discrimination as well as strong pressure from family and community to return to Buddhism, Hinduism, or the traditional Bön faith.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

These include Evangelical and Pentecostal communities. They are closely monitored by the authorities; raids and arrests occasionally occur.

## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Religious nationalism - Buddhist:

Though technically a secular state, Bhutan's spiritual heritage is Mahayana Buddhism. According to the Constitution, incorporated by the king, "It is the responsibility of all religious institutions and personalities to promote the spiritual heritage of the country." The king is a very visible and youthful sign of religion, and is highly revered. No Christian congregation has been allowed to build a church structure. Especially in rural areas, Buddhist monks oppose the presence of Christians, putting pressure on them to reconvert. Officials tend to side with the monks (there is a practice of monks working for the government) and are willing to do whatever is necessary to preserve the Buddhist social fabric. Society is closely-knit and any deviation is perceived as disturbing the harmony, so family and community also put pressure on converts.



# How are men and women differently affected?

## WOMEN

Although gender inequality has historically favored women in Bhutan’s traditional matriarchal society, limited political representation and high rates of child marriage create an environment of contradictions which put significant family pressure on women. Women who convert from Buddhism to Christianity are at the greatest risk of persecution, typically through family disownment or divorce. Christians married to non-Christians are under pressure to stay with their husbands, despite domestic abuse. For single converts, forced marriage is a tangible threat, as well as being disowned and forced to leave the family home.

- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Forced out of home / expulsion
- Violence – psychological

## MEN

Traditional matriarchal norms means that inheritance and land ownership is preferred, though not legislated, to pass down the female line. Male converts may be disowned by their family, expelled from their home, and lose their inheritance. They may further be rejected by their peers and local community, compounding the sense of isolation. Men

may also experience discrimination in the workplace. When they lose their job or are excluded from the traditional way of farming, their family is affected as they are typically the financial provider.

- Denied inheritance of possessions
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Forced out of home / expulsion
- Violence – psychological

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	40	66
2022	34	67
2021	43	64
2020	45	61
2019	33	64

*The score for Bhutan marginally decreased by 0.4 points. Fewer incidents of violence were reported, but this may also be due to the fact that Bhutan was almost closed for traveling at least for parts of the reporting period. The Church sphere of life increased most in scores, as meetings of Christians remained difficult. Pressure was on a comparable level in all spheres, reflecting in particular the continued difficulties faced by Christian converts from Buddhism or ethnic-animist religion.*



# Examples of violence in the reporting period

For security reasons, no details can be published here.

---

## Private life

All conversions are strictly opposed by family, community, religious authorities and the state; even giving out a Christian leaflet can lead to arrest. Section 463 (A) of the country's Penal Code states that conversion by means of "coercion" or "other means of inducement" is a punishable offense. The terms are not clearly defined, making it easier for authorities and religious leaders to use it as anti-conversion legislation. Converts usually hide their faith publicly and meet discreetly with others. Christians and even churches avoid displaying Christian images in public since it might provoke a negative reaction from nationalist and radical Buddhists.

## Family life

Children of Christians experience pressure and discrimination from school teachers and classmates. They are required to learn about Buddhism and participate in rituals and prayers, including bowing down to shrines. Christian funerals will often be prevented by non-Christian family members, society, and the authorities. Deceased Christians have to be buried in neighboring India due to strong opposition. Baptisms are seen as the ultimate proof of conversion by "inducement" and are therefore carried out in secret.

## Community life

Christians are expected to participate in Buddhist activities particularly in villages, and failure to do so leads to harassment. Christians are monitored (e.g., phone tapping, social media usage observed) by their local community and reported to the authorities. If a Christian is accused under the anti-conversion law, they are called to the police station and interrogated. Christians miss out on employment opportunities and government subsidy schemes, or can be dismissed if their Christian faith becomes known. For these reasons, Christians often hide their faith.

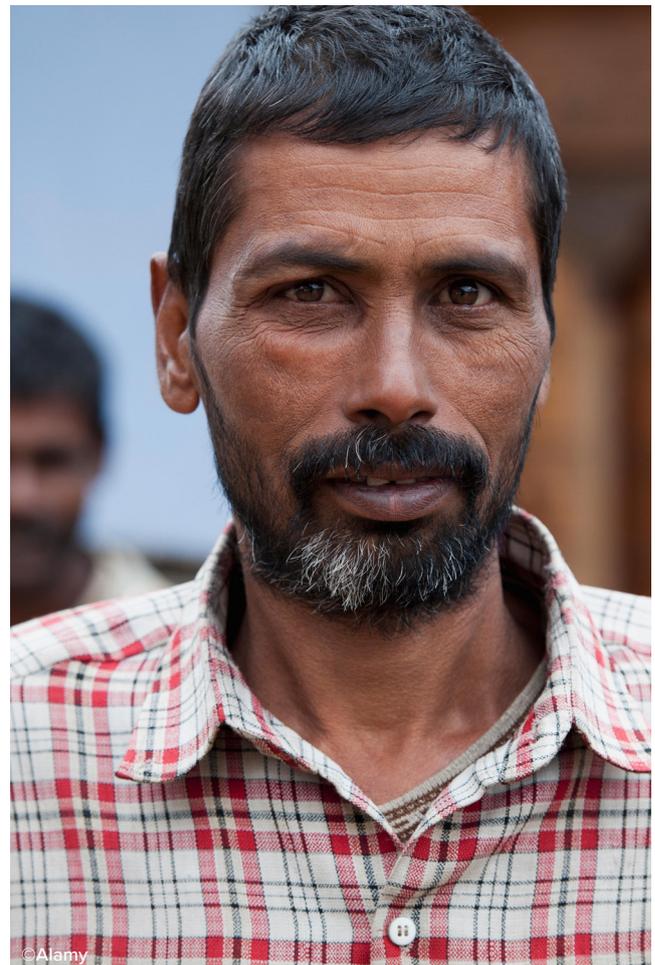
## National life

The Constitution protects Mahayana Buddhism as the nation's "spiritual heritage". Although the Constitution mentions the right to freedom of religion or belief, Section 463 (A) of the Penal Code states: "A defendant shall be guilty of the offense of compelling others to belong to another faith if the defendant used coercion or other forms of inducement to cause the conversion of a person from one religion or faith to another." This

can be punished by up to three years in prison. The Commission for Religious Organization (CRO), the state authority that provides registration for religious organizations, has not yet recognized any Christian civil society organizations or political parties.

## Church life

Registration continues to be the biggest problem for churches, as without it they are technically illegal. Although the national government says that Christians may gather, meetings are disrupted by villagers or their legality is questioned at a local level. Christian groups who seek registration with the Commission of Religious Organizations (CRO) do not receive a response. Bibles and other Christian materials cannot be produced in Bhutan and importing them is not allowed, unless they are brought in small quantities for private use only.



# International obligations & rights violated

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)
- Christian female converts run the risk of being forcibly married to non-Christian men (CEDAW Art. 16)



## Situation of other religious minorities

Lhotshampas, who generally live in southern Bhutan but are of Nepalese descent, are a mostly Hindu group, comprising around 33% of the population. They have been victims of severe state discrimination and persecution by Bhutan and Nepal in recent decades. As a result, in part due to the “One nation, one people” assimilationist policy of enforcing the traditions of the dominant Drukpa Buddhist elite on all members of the Bhutanese population, many minorities find themselves stripped of citizenship rights and unable to access education, employment, healthcare or housing.



### Open Doors in Bhutan

Open Doors local partners provide immediate aid to Bhutanese believers when their faith in Christ leads to various kinds of persecution. We strengthen the persecuted church in Bhutan, primarily through prayer support and other practical emergency support.

#### About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

*All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

---