

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

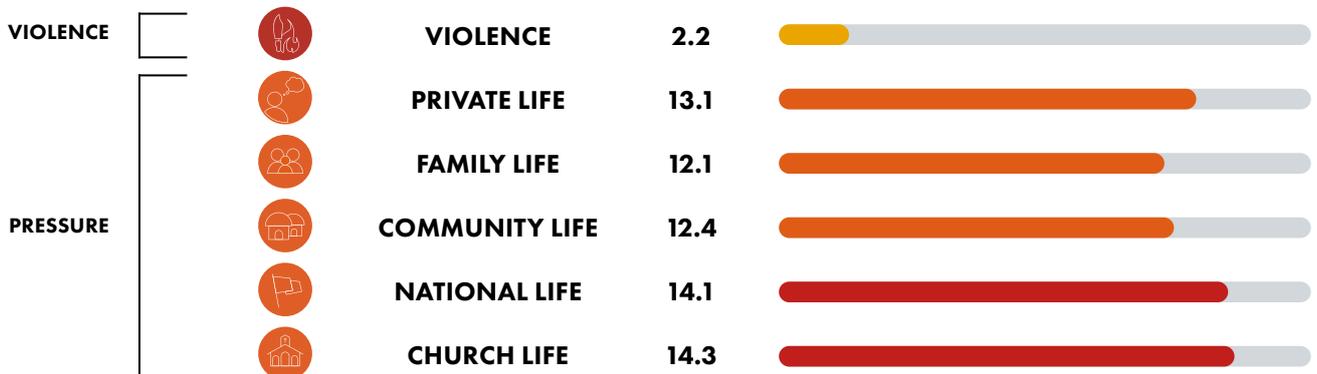
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

BHUTAN

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
36



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 and live in the south. No churches have official state recognition, which means that Christians are technically worshipping illegally. Also, for day-to-day life, all citizens need a document referred to as a “non-objection certificate” (NOC) which is issued by village authorities to confirm that the individual in question is a good citizen and has caused no problems in the village. This certificate is needed for loan applications, registering property, applying for jobs and the renewal of ID cards. For Christians who do not have Bhutanese citizenship, the NOC is impossible to get. Sometimes, Christians are threatened with being deleted from the census records, as the census form requires citizens to indicate their religious affiliation.

Quick facts

LEADER

King Jigme Khesar
Namgyel Wangchuck

POPULATION

796,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

19,500¹

MAIN RELIGION

Buddhism

GOVERNMENT

Constitutional Monarchy



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	19,500	2.4
Buddhists	650,000	81.7
Hindus	95,300	12.0
Ethno-religionists	28,100	3.5

Source²

Bhutan is one of the very few examples where a governance change was implemented top-down and not bottom-up, with the king creating a constitutional monarchy in 1998. 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.

The Constitution states that Mahayana Buddhism is protected as the nation's "spiritual heritage" and all religious institutions have a constitutional duty to promote this heritage. In May 2011, the government inserted an anti-conversion clause into the law which says: "A Bhutanese citizen shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. No person shall be compelled to belong to another faith by means of coercion or inducement". Notably, the terms "coercion" and "other means of inducement" are not clearly defined; this gives the authorities and ethnic and religious leaders leverage to put pressure on converts.

Section 463 (A) of the Penal Code (Amendment) Act of Bhutan 2011 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". Section 463 (B) adds: "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.

After the government announced that registration is not a prerequisite for religious meetings in 2019, Christians had hoped for more room to maneuver, but so far no change has been felt. It may well be, however, that the authorities are leaving this question open on purpose, as they do not wish to stir up any unwanted public ill-feeling at a time when the government has so many other challenges to focus on. Minorities are able to vote and stand for elections, but the voice of religious minorities in particular is given little attention in society and government. Civil and political rights still have a long way to go.

Bhutan is a very small country, bordering the two most populous countries in the world, China and India. Such a situation requires much wisdom in balancing foreign relations, although traditionally ties with India have always been strong. Bhutan is the only country bordering China with which Beijing does not maintain formal diplomatic relations due to India's substantial influence.

¹ Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

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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 expatriate 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, "It is the responsibility of all religious institutions and personalities to promote the spiritual heritage of the country." 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 contradiction that puts 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.

Female typical pressure points:

- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Forced marriage
- Violence – psychological

Men

Traditional matriarchal norms mean 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.

Male typical pressure points:

- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access



WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	36	68
2023	40	66
2022	34	67
2021	43	64
2020	45	61

The persecution situation in Bhutan has not changed very much in the WWL 2024 period; the score increased by 1.9 points. More incidents of violence were reported, but violence is still at a comparably low level, although the score has doubled. Pressure increased the most in the Community sphere of life, but apart from pressure on individual Christians, pressure on churches remains high. Christian converts continued to face difficulties when converting from a Buddhist or ethnic-animist religion. 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. Christian churches experienced harassment and difficulties meeting, especially after a letter from the Department of Law and Order of the Ministry of Home Affairs from April 2023 had requested the Dzongkhag and Thormde Administrations to not allow religious gatherings without approval along with programs that are not keeping with Bhutanese cultural, tradition and social values.



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 and meet discreetly with others. Christians and even churches avoid displaying Christian images 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. According to the field expert: "Christians are experiencing challenges regarding the census as government officials keep on convincing them that Christians will be receiving an identification card, but Christians have yet to receive any even after several visits."

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 and 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. The letter mentioned above illustrates that

only religious gatherings in line with "Bhutanese culture" are acceptable.

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 in small quantities for private use only.



International obligations & rights violated

Bhutan has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under 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

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Bhutan): “The Hindu Devi Panchayan Temple in Thimphu, funded by the government, approved by the King, and consecrated in 2019, formally opened on September 23 (2022). According to the NGO Minority Rights Group International, authorities gave Buddhist temples priority over Hindu temples in the licensing process.” (page 3) 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 20 July 2023).



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.



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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: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
