

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

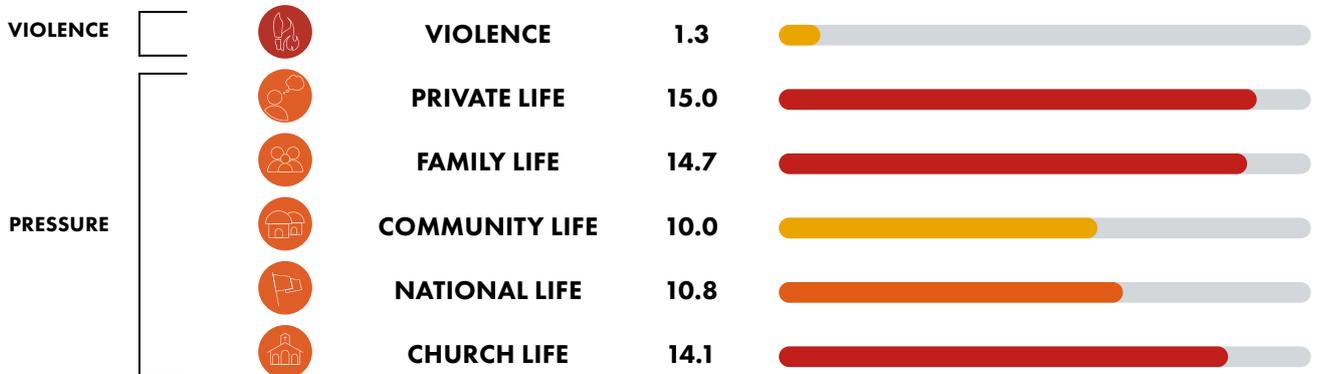
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

BRUNEI

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
44



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

Converts from Islam face pressure from their families and communities and conversion is punishable by Sharia Penal Law if a case is brought against them, even though cases have not become known in the reporting period. Everything will be done to bring converts back to their original faith. Non-traditional Christian communities cannot be registered as churches, but to operate legally they are registered as companies, societies, or family centers. As such, they are treated as secular organizations and are required to submit their financial and operational reports to the government every year. The whole of society (Christians included) is affected by the continuing introduction of Sharia laws.

Quick facts

LEADER

Sultan and Prime Minister Sir Hassanal Bolkiah

POPULATION

449,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

54,200¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Absolute Monarchy or Sultanate



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	54,200	12.1
Muslims	259,000	57.7
Buddhists	45,700	10.2
Ethno-religionists	45,300	10.1

Source²

In Brunei, the Sultan rules as [absolute monarch](#). People deeply respect the Sultan and there is little demand for more political participation. In a major [cabinet reshuffle](#) in June 2022, the Sultan replaced eight ministers. While his own ministerial duties remained unchanged, the change is noteworthy because, for the first time since 1958, a woman has been made a full member of the cabinet, in this case as the Minister of Education (The Scoop, 7 June 2022).

The national philosophy is Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB), a blend of Malay and Islamic cultural values, guarded by the monarchy. May 2014 saw the introduction of the Sharia Penal Code (which also applies to non-Muslims); however, [implementation did not happen until 2019](#). International media was quick to highlight the [serious consequences](#) for the LGBT+ community in the country, and there were calls to boycott all luxury hotels belonging to a company owned by the Sultan. So far, [no cases](#) against religious minorities (or the LGBT+ community) have been reported.

Ethnically, Malay Bruneians comprise 57% of the population and are presumed to be Muslim. The Chinese population is Buddhist and Christian (Christians make up 12% of the overall population). Christians are free to worship, but they have been warned against doing outreach or becoming too public.

Apart from the Roman Catholic and Anglican Church, there are a few Protestant churches in Brunei, which also serve expatriate communities (for instance, Filipinos and Indians).

How the situation varies by region

The country is small and there are no particular areas where Christians face more violations.

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

² Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

Historical Christian communities

This includes the Roman Catholic and Anglican Church. They are strictly monitored and must exercise caution, though they experience less pressure than newer Protestant groups and converts.

Converts to Christianity

Converts from a Muslim background face strong pressure from family and friends, as conversion is considered illegal. Should someone's conversion become known, authorities will step in to bring them back to their original faith.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Non-traditional Christian communities consist of the Evangelicals and Pentecostals. They are closely watched by the authorities and surrounding community.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression blended with dictatorial paranoia

Sharia law, in its civil and administrative dimension, was fully implemented even before Brunei's independence in 1984. The government has offered incentives to prospective converts to Islam (especially from indigenous communities) including help with housing and welfare. Family members and neighbors can easily create trouble for converts to Christianity by reporting them to the security department (the KDN), which happens frequently. A government body, the Malay Islamic Monarchy Supreme Council, seeks to spread MIB philosophy and ensure it is enshrined in the nation's laws and policies.

How are men and women differently affected?

Women

While Brunei is a CEDAW-signatory country, women and religious minorities are under threat from the new Sharia Penal Code. Due to the strict implementation of Islamic laws, Christian women in general should dress modestly and can be forced to wear a hijab in government-run educational institutions and offices. Women and girls are usually disowned by their family when their conversion becomes known. They may be forced to attend spiritual rehabilitation programs. Sometimes, women are threatened with forced marriage to a Muslim, or if married, may have their children taken away to ensure a Muslim upbringing.

Female typical pressure points:

- Denied custody of children
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – psychological

Men

Converts to Christianity face the strongest levels of pressure for their faith. Men and boys are usually disowned by the family when they convert and are forced to leave the family home. They also face beatings, humiliation and harsh treatment when persecuted by religious authorities. Students may also experience discrimination and verbal abuse in educational settings.

Male typical pressure points:

- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Violence – physical
- Violence – verbal

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	44	66
2023	46	65
2022	46	64
2021	39	64
2020	37	63

The score in WWL 2024 increased by 0.7 points, reflecting a stable, but difficult situation for Christians in the country. The implementation of Sharia Penal Law has not affected the score yet, and it remains to be seen what it will mean for Christians, apart from increased insecurity and fear. The pressure on Church life increased the strongest, as restrictions on working among youth have become more strongly felt, especially when such ministry can be understood as proselytization. The average pressure is very high. The score for violence tripled, but at a very low level. Controlling, watching and spying upon Christians remains more important for the authorities than exerting force.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- By decree, the importing of Bibles and any public celebration of Christmas continue to be banned.
- Christian pastors and workers face a multitude of restrictions, including monitoring. Both native and foreign Christians have been targets of aggressive Islamization. .

WWL Year	Christians forced to flee their countries
2024	10*
2023	5

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.



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Private life

Bruneian law stipulates that turning away from Islam is punishable by death or a long prison sentence with corporal punishment. A convert to Christianity may not discuss their faith since it can be construed as proselytizing, which is against Sharia law, and can be punished with a prison sentence or fine. Christians, especially church leaders, are under permanent surveillance by the authorities.

Family life

Schools are not allowed to teach about Christianity and all students must study Islam (or rather the national MIB philosophy). Female students must wear a headscarf in government-run educational institutions. Pressure is especially high for children of converts once it is discovered that their parents are “apostates”. The law bans any Muslim from surrendering custody of a minor to a non-Muslim. Therefore, non-Muslims cannot adopt Muslim children or children whose parents are unknown.

Community life

Islam has permeated every aspect of society, and Christians are under pressure from society and the government to take part in Islamic rites and ceremonies. There are strict regulations and penalties during Ramadan concerning the observance of Muslim prayer times, both for Muslims and non-Muslims. Churches are experiencing a gradual reduction in membership as people leave for

Islam, primarily to avoid social pressure but also for monetary benefits like receiving 1,000 BN\$ per year for 10 years. Occasionally, other incentives are reported as well. Islamic missionary (dawah) efforts are widely publicized and celebrated in national newspapers, where converts are announced with their new names.

National life

With a sedition law in place and MIB and Sharia Penal Code always in the back of their minds, Christians are very careful to self-censor to avoid trouble, especially as it is unclear which statements could be considered seditious. Benefits and promotions are limited to Malays and converts to Islam if they are citizens, which adds pressure on Christians to convert.

Church life

Six churches have legal permits, having obtained them during the colonial era. The government does not allow any other churches to be registered. All church activities, especially the content of preaching, are monitored, with registered churches being particularly affected by government informers. These informers are sometimes Christians themselves who are offered bribes. Pastors are very careful not to say anything that could be interpreted as criticizing or offending the government or the royal family. Published materials are also subject to scrutiny. There is a permanent ban on importing printed religious material.

International obligations & rights violated

Brunei 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)

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

- Christian parents cannot raise their children according to their religious values (CRC Art. 14)
- Christian female converts run the risk of being forcibly married to Muslim men or losing custody of their children (CEDAW Art. 16)

Situation of other religious minorities

Non-Sunni Muslim groups seen as deviant - such as Shiites and Ahmadis - are banned and persecuted. Atheism is also not allowed. The activities of Hindus have been restricted. The only Hindu temple in the country is located in the British military barracks of the Gurkha regiment. Sikh and Buddhist communities also visit the temple to pray. Chinese residents have been banned from celebrating their new year with the dragon dance. The indigenous Iban community, many of whom are animists, are particularly targeted for dawah (Islamic mission).

In what was said to be a first, on 15 October 2019, a non-Muslim was charged under Sharia law for theft (Borneo Bulletin, 15 October 2019). Posts on social media in Brunei expressed shock that Sharia law was evidently now applicable to non-Muslims, too.

Open Doors in Brunei

The Church in Brunei is living under Sharia law, which came in to effect on 3 April 2019 and applies to all residents, Muslims and non-Muslims, including expats. Therefore, Open Doors calls for increasing prayer support from worldwide Christians for the believers, the local churches, the Sultan and his government officials.



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.
