

WORLD WATCH LIST 2025

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

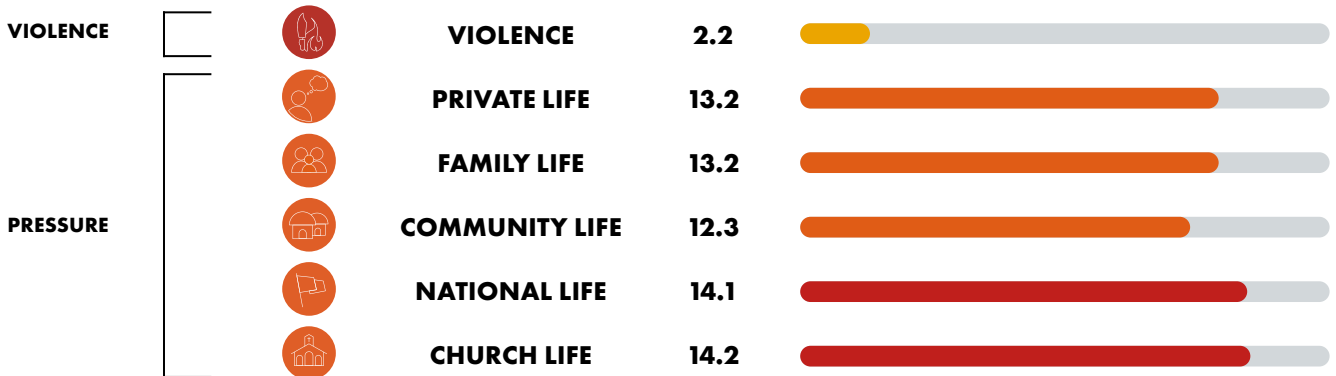
WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
36

BHUTAN



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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. They are isolated and ridiculed on social media platforms.

Quick facts

LEADER

King Jigme Khesar
Namgyel Wangchuck

POPULATION

792,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

18,800¹

MAIN RELIGION

Buddhism

GOVERNMENT

Constitutional Monarchy



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Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	18,800	2.4
Buddhists	655,000	82.7
Hindus	90,800	11.5
Ethno-religionists	25,800	3.3

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 Penal Code

in order to fulfil Article 7(4) of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan which states: "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 in the Penal Code; 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.

¹ Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

² Data source: Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

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. China's [claims](#) over Bhutanese territory has also increased in recent years.

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.

Female typical pressure points:

- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage

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
2025	36	69
2024	36	68
2023	40	66
2022	34	67
2021	43	64

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.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

For security reasons, no details can be published here.

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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 are most often 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 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. 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 2023 Bhutan): “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. “ 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, not just by Bhutan alone but by Nepal also.



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

- The content of this document is based on the more detailed WWL Persecution Dynamics per country published 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: © 2025 Open Doors International.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the WWL Persecution Dynamics per country, accompanying Background Information per country and the latest update of WWL Methodology. These are also available at the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).
- The WWL 2025 reporting period was 01 October 2023 – 30 September 2024.

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.