

World
Watch
Research

Bhutan: Full Country Dossier

January 2022



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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Woman in Bhutan (c) Unsplash

Introduction

World Watch List 2022

| Rank | Country | Private life | Family life | Community life | National life | Church life | Violence | Total Score WWL 2022 | Total Score WWL 2021 | Total Score WWL 2020 | Total Score WWL 2019 | Total Score WWL 2018 |
|------|--------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|----------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1 | Afghanistan | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 15.0 | 98 | 94 | 93 | 94 | 93 |
| 2 | North Korea | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 13.1 | 96 | 94 | 94 | 94 | 94 |
| 3 | Somalia | 16.5 | 16.7 | 16.6 | 16.6 | 16.6 | 8.5 | 91 | 92 | 92 | 91 | 91 |
| 4 | Libya | 15.6 | 15.5 | 15.9 | 16.2 | 16.3 | 11.5 | 91 | 92 | 90 | 87 | 86 |
| 5 | Yemen | 16.7 | 16.6 | 16.5 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 5.2 | 88 | 87 | 85 | 86 | 85 |
| 6 | Eritrea | 14.6 | 14.9 | 15.5 | 15.9 | 15.6 | 11.1 | 88 | 88 | 87 | 86 | 86 |
| 7 | Nigeria | 13.8 | 13.8 | 14.3 | 14.5 | 14.4 | 16.7 | 87 | 85 | 80 | 80 | 77 |
| 8 | Pakistan | 13.6 | 14.0 | 15.1 | 14.9 | 13.1 | 16.7 | 87 | 88 | 88 | 87 | 86 |
| 9 | Iran | 14.5 | 14.6 | 13.6 | 15.8 | 16.5 | 10.4 | 85 | 86 | 85 | 85 | 85 |
| 10 | India | 12.7 | 12.7 | 12.9 | 14.7 | 13.3 | 15.6 | 82 | 83 | 83 | 83 | 81 |
| 11 | Saudi Arabia | 15.1 | 15.1 | 15.0 | 15.9 | 16.7 | 3.1 | 81 | 78 | 79 | 77 | 79 |
| 12 | Myanmar | 12.4 | 11.5 | 13.8 | 13.4 | 13.1 | 14.8 | 79 | 74 | 73 | 71 | 65 |
| 13 | Sudan | 13.4 | 13.4 | 14.3 | 13.6 | 15.7 | 8.5 | 79 | 79 | 85 | 87 | 87 |
| 14 | Iraq | 14.0 | 14.6 | 14.0 | 14.8 | 13.9 | 6.9 | 78 | 82 | 76 | 79 | 86 |
| 15 | Syria | 12.9 | 13.8 | 13.5 | 14.3 | 13.9 | 9.3 | 78 | 81 | 82 | 82 | 76 |
| 16 | Maldives | 15.4 | 15.3 | 13.7 | 15.8 | 16.5 | 0.4 | 77 | 77 | 78 | 78 | 78 |
| 17 | China | 12.6 | 9.8 | 12.2 | 14.4 | 15.5 | 11.1 | 76 | 74 | 70 | 65 | 57 |
| 18 | Qatar | 14.2 | 14.1 | 11.1 | 13.0 | 14.3 | 7.2 | 74 | 67 | 66 | 62 | 63 |
| 19 | Vietnam | 11.3 | 9.7 | 12.7 | 14.1 | 14.5 | 8.7 | 71 | 72 | 72 | 70 | 69 |
| 20 | Egypt | 12.7 | 13.2 | 11.5 | 12.7 | 10.8 | 10.0 | 71 | 75 | 76 | 76 | 70 |
| 21 | Uzbekistan | 14.9 | 12.7 | 14.1 | 11.8 | 15.6 | 1.7 | 71 | 71 | 73 | 74 | 73 |
| 22 | Algeria | 14.0 | 14.0 | 11.1 | 13.4 | 14.1 | 4.1 | 71 | 70 | 73 | 70 | 58 |
| 23 | Mauritania | 14.3 | 13.9 | 13.1 | 14.0 | 14.1 | 0.9 | 70 | 71 | 68 | 67 | 57 |
| 24 | Mali | 9.4 | 8.2 | 13.9 | 10.3 | 12.8 | 15.0 | 70 | 67 | 66 | 68 | 59 |
| 25 | Turkmenistan | 14.5 | 11.3 | 13.6 | 13.3 | 15.7 | 0.6 | 69 | 70 | 70 | 69 | 68 |
| 26 | Laos | 12.0 | 10.3 | 13.2 | 13.3 | 14.1 | 5.9 | 69 | 71 | 72 | 71 | 67 |
| 27 | Morocco | 13.1 | 13.8 | 10.8 | 12.8 | 14.2 | 3.9 | 69 | 67 | 66 | 63 | 51 |
| 28 | Indonesia | 11.3 | 11.5 | 11.5 | 11.0 | 9.6 | 13.5 | 68 | 63 | 60 | 65 | 59 |
| 29 | Bangladesh | 11.8 | 10.7 | 12.9 | 11.3 | 10.2 | 11.3 | 68 | 67 | 63 | 58 | 58 |
| 30 | Colombia | 11.5 | 8.8 | 13.1 | 11.0 | 9.9 | 13.3 | 68 | 67 | 62 | 58 | 56 |
| 31 | CAR | 9.0 | 8.6 | 13.6 | 9.6 | 11.4 | 15.6 | 68 | 66 | 68 | 70 | 61 |
| 32 | Burkina Faso | 9.4 | 9.7 | 12.0 | 9.6 | 12.1 | 14.8 | 68 | 67 | 66 | 48 | - |
| 33 | Niger | 9.4 | 9.5 | 13.9 | 7.2 | 12.8 | 14.8 | 68 | 62 | 60 | 52 | 45 |
| 34 | Bhutan | 13.4 | 12.4 | 11.7 | 13.7 | 13.8 | 1.7 | 67 | 64 | 61 | 64 | 62 |
| 35 | Tunisia | 11.9 | 12.7 | 10.6 | 11.3 | 13.4 | 6.5 | 66 | 67 | 64 | 63 | 62 |
| 36 | Oman | 13.8 | 14.0 | 10.3 | 13.2 | 13.4 | 1.5 | 66 | 63 | 62 | 59 | 57 |
| 37 | Cuba | 12.3 | 8.1 | 12.6 | 13.2 | 14.0 | 5.9 | 66 | 62 | 52 | 49 | 49 |
| 38 | Ethiopia | 9.9 | 10.3 | 13.1 | 10.3 | 12.3 | 9.8 | 66 | 65 | 63 | 65 | 62 |
| 39 | Jordan | 12.9 | 14.0 | 11.0 | 12.3 | 12.5 | 3.0 | 66 | 64 | 64 | 65 | 66 |
| 40 | DRC | 8.0 | 7.9 | 12.6 | 9.7 | 12.0 | 15.6 | 66 | 64 | 56 | 55 | 33 |
| 41 | Mozambique | 9.3 | 8.5 | 11.3 | 7.9 | 12.5 | 15.6 | 65 | 63 | 43 | 43 | - |
| 42 | Turkey | 12.6 | 11.5 | 11.4 | 13.2 | 11.6 | 4.6 | 65 | 69 | 63 | 66 | 62 |
| 43 | Mexico | 10.3 | 8.3 | 12.5 | 10.8 | 10.3 | 12.6 | 65 | 64 | 60 | 61 | 59 |
| 44 | Cameroon | 8.8 | 7.6 | 12.6 | 7.2 | 13.1 | 15.4 | 65 | 64 | 60 | 54 | 38 |
| 45 | Tajikistan | 13.8 | 12.3 | 12.0 | 12.6 | 13.2 | 0.7 | 65 | 66 | 65 | 65 | 65 |
| 46 | Brunei | 14.8 | 14.5 | 10.3 | 11.0 | 13.2 | 0.6 | 64 | 64 | 63 | 63 | 64 |
| 47 | Kazakhstan | 13.4 | 11.6 | 11.1 | 12.6 | 13.5 | 1.7 | 64 | 64 | 64 | 63 | 63 |
| 48 | Nepal | 12.4 | 9.8 | 9.9 | 13.6 | 12.7 | 5.2 | 64 | 66 | 64 | 64 | 64 |
| 49 | Kuwait | 13.5 | 13.7 | 9.8 | 12.3 | 13.1 | 1.1 | 64 | 63 | 62 | 60 | 61 |
| 50 | Malaysia | 12.5 | 14.3 | 11.5 | 11.6 | 10.2 | 3.3 | 63 | 63 | 62 | 60 | 65 |

| Rank | Country | Private life | Family life | Community life | National life | Church life | Violence | Total Score WWL 2022 | Total Score WWL 2021 | Total Score WWL 2020 | Total Score WWL 2019 | Total Score WWL 2018 |
|------|-------------------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|----------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 51 | Kenya | 11.7 | 9.2 | 11.4 | 8.0 | 11.5 | 11.1 | 63 | 62 | 61 | 61 | 62 |
| 52 | Sri Lanka | 12.9 | 9.9 | 11.4 | 11.3 | 9.4 | 7.8 | 63 | 62 | 65 | 58 | 57 |
| 53 | Comoros | 12.7 | 11.1 | 11.2 | 12.4 | 14.2 | 0.9 | 63 | 62 | 57 | 56 | 56 |
| 54 | UAE | 13.4 | 13.6 | 10.1 | 11.8 | 12.2 | 1.3 | 62 | 62 | 60 | 58 | 58 |
| 55 | Tanzania | 9.3 | 10.8 | 10.3 | 8.6 | 8.7 | 13.7 | 61 | 58 | 55 | 52 | 53 |
| 56 | Azerbaijan | 13.1 | 9.9 | 9.3 | 11.0 | 13.4 | 3.3 | 60 | 56 | 57 | 57 | 57 |
| 57 | Palestinian Territories | 13.0 | 13.4 | 9.8 | 10.2 | 12.0 | 0.9 | 59 | 58 | 60 | 57 | 60 |
| 58 | Djibouti | 12.3 | 12.3 | 11.1 | 10.0 | 12.2 | 0.7 | 59 | 56 | 56 | 56 | 56 |
| 59 | Kyrgyzstan | 12.9 | 10.1 | 11.1 | 10.4 | 12.0 | 1.5 | 58 | 58 | 57 | 56 | 54 |
| 60 | Bahrain | 12.5 | 13.2 | 9.1 | 11.1 | 10.2 | 0.9 | 57 | 56 | 55 | 55 | 57 |
| 61 | Nicaragua | 9.1 | 5.6 | 11.1 | 11.8 | 11.3 | 7.6 | 56 | 51 | 41 | 41 | - |
| 62 | Russian Federation | 12.3 | 8.0 | 10.2 | 10.6 | 12.3 | 2.2 | 56 | 57 | 60 | 60 | 51 |
| 63 | Chad | 11.5 | 8.2 | 10.2 | 9.6 | 10.3 | 5.6 | 55 | 53 | 56 | 48 | 40 |
| 64 | Burundi | 7.6 | 7.8 | 9.7 | 9.2 | 9.6 | 8.1 | 52 | 48 | 48 | 43 | - |
| 65 | Venezuela | 5.6 | 4.5 | 11.2 | 9.4 | 11.1 | 9.6 | 51 | 39 | 42 | 41 | 34 |
| 66 | Angola | 6.8 | 6.7 | 8.1 | 10.1 | 11.4 | 7.8 | 51 | 46 | 43 | 42 | - |
| 67 | Rwanda | 8.1 | 5.5 | 6.7 | 10.3 | 10.1 | 9.3 | 50 | 42 | 42 | 41 | - |
| 68 | Honduras | 7.2 | 5.1 | 10.5 | 7.7 | 9.2 | 8.7 | 48 | 46 | 39 | 38 | - |
| 69 | Uganda | 8.1 | 4.6 | 7.4 | 6.7 | 9.1 | 11.7 | 48 | 47 | 48 | 47 | 46 |
| 70 | El Salvador | 7.7 | 4.6 | 10.7 | 5.7 | 9.1 | 7.2 | 45 | 42 | 38 | 30 | - |
| 71 | Togo | 9.2 | 6.7 | 9.3 | 7.1 | 9.8 | 2.4 | 44 | 43 | 41 | 42 | - |
| 72 | Gambia | 8.3 | 8.2 | 8.7 | 8.3 | 8.8 | 1.7 | 44 | 43 | 43 | 43 | - |
| 73 | Guinea | 10.3 | 7.5 | 8.3 | 7.0 | 8.1 | 2.0 | 43 | 47 | 45 | 46 | - |
| 74 | South Sudan | 5.7 | 0.9 | 7.0 | 6.3 | 7.8 | 15.0 | 43 | 43 | 44 | 44 | - |
| 75 | Ivory Coast | 9.8 | 8.6 | 8.2 | 5.5 | 7.9 | 2.0 | 42 | 42 | 42 | 43 | - |
| 76 | Israel | 9.8 | 8.4 | 5.6 | 6.6 | 6.6 | 4.3 | 41 | 40 | 38 | 39 | 40 |

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes 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 conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- 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 including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

In the WWL 2022 reporting period, travel restrictions and other measures introduced by the governments of various countries to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic did cause delays and create the need for restructuring grass-roots research in some cases. Through the agile cooperation of In-country networks, Open Doors country researchers, External experts, WWR analysts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that – as in the previous reporting period – WWL 2022 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

External Links - Introduction

- Sources and definitions: World Watch List Documentation - <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>

WWL 2022 Situation in brief / Bhutan

Brief country details

In the table below, the number of Christians shown is an Open Doors (OD) estimate.

| Bhutan: Population (UN estimate for 2021) | Christians | Chr% |
|---|------------|-------------|
| 844,000 | 30,000 | OD estimate |

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

Map of country



| Bhutan: World Watch List | Points | WWL Rank |
|--------------------------|--------|----------|
| WWL 2022 | 67 | 34 |
| WWL 2021 | 64 | 43 |
| WWL 2020 | 61 | 45 |
| WWL 2019 | 64 | 33 |
| WWL 2018 | 62 | 33 |

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2018-2022 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

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. Converts to Christianity will be watched with suspicion and efforts are usually made to bring them back to their former religion. Religious leaders, the local community and family often cooperate in this. Apart from converts, many Christians come from the Nepalese minority. No churches have official recognition by the state, 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.

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 are published here.

External Links - Situation in brief

- 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>

WWL 2022: Keys to understanding / Bhutan

Links for general background information

| Name | Quote Reference | Link | Last accessed on |
|--|-------------------------------------|---|------------------|
| Amnesty International country report (Bhutan is not included) | AI 2021 | https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/ | |
| BBC News country profile | BBC country profile | https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12480707 | 17 August 2021 |
| Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2020 | BTI 2020 | https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard-BTN.html | 17 August 2021 |
| CIA World Factbook | CIA Factbook | https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/bhutan/ | 17 August 2021 |
| Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2020 | EIU 2020 | https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/democracy-index-2020.pdf | 17 August 2021 |
| FFP's Fragile States Index 2021 | FSI 2021 | https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/ | 17 August 2021 |
| Freedom House's 2021 Democracy index (Bhutan is not included) | Freedom House/Democracy 2021 | https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores | |
| Freedom House's 2021 Global Freedom index | Freedom House/Global Freedom 2021 | https://freedomhouse.org/country/bhutan/freedom-world/2021 | 17 August 2021 |
| Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2020 report (Bhutan is not included) | Freedom House/Internet Freedom 2020 | https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores | |
| Garda World country report | Garda World | https://www.garda.com/crisis24/country-reports/bhutan | 17 August 2021 |
| Human Rights Watch World Report 2021 (Bhutan is not included) | HRW 2021 | https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021 | |
| Internet World Stats 2021 | IWS 2021 | https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#bt | 17 August 2021 |
| RSF's 2020 World Press Freedom Index | World Press Freedom 2020 | https://rsf.org/en/bhutan | 17 August 2021 |
| Transparency International's 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index | CPI 2020 | https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/btn | 17 August 2021 |
| UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators | HDI 2020 | http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/BTN | 17 August 2021 |
| US State Department's 2020 International Religious Freedom country reports | IRFR 2020 | https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bhutan/ | 17 August 2021 |
| USCIRF 2021 country reports (Bhutan is not included) | USCIRF 2021 | https://www.uscifr.gov/countries | |
| World Bank country report | World Bank | https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bhutan | 17 August 2021 |

Recent history

Bhutan was a kingdom with little contact with the outside world until the 1970s. After elections in March 2008 it became a two-party parliamentary democracy. Bhutan sees the necessity to open up, for example in developing a legal system which is more complex than the traditional way of balancing interests. This is why the country set up a new law school with the help of a US university in October 2016. This step should help the country to make different ways of thinking more welcome, but it could also lead to a renewed emphasis on the country's own traditions and values. In a time when traditions seem to be side-lined (or at least challenged) by outward influences and the country is "modernizing", there may be efforts to limit additional foreign influence.

During the country's Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council in September 2019 the government stated that: "Registration of religious organization is not a prerequisite for practice. Religious groups are free to practice without registering with the Chhoday Lhentshogy (Commission for Religious Organizations)." (Source: [A/HRC/42/8/Add.1](#), p.8.) This has been a welcome statement, but Christians still have not been recognized in the country and the claim

needs to be fulfilled in practice. Christian groups are able to meet, but have to do so without raising any attention.

Political and legal landscape

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. There are voices saying that the transition from monarchy to democracy was a political strategy to divert international attention away from the long-lasting refugee problem (unresolved since the 1990s). A [Constitution](#) was not enacted until 2008, when Bhutanese citizens elected a parliament and the new king was inaugurated at the age of 28. The king, who has now ruled for 12 years, possesses ultimate authority and has the power to veto decisions, although he does not use this power publicly. He is regarded as the guardian of Buddhism and although he is young and very popular, he will not alter the role Buddhism plays in society. Under the “National Security Act 1992”, it is treason to speak against the king, people or country. Anyone found criticizing the king and the government is jailed and convicted under this Act. The king's popularity even grew during the COVID-19 pandemic as he [trekked the country](#) far and wide to visit his subjects, informing them about the pandemic, quarantining and being vaccinated just like them (Channel News Asia, 25 June 2021).

The Constitution states that Mahayana Buddhism is protected as the nation's "spiritual heritage". This means that Buddhism is treated as state religion and all religious institutions have the constitutional duty to promote this heritage. On 24 May 2011, the government enacted an amendment to the law and inserted an anti-conversion clause. This was inserted 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; 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 misdemeanour", 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 at present. Country observers say that so far the new government's [track record](#) is good and it has kept several promises for improving the life of the people (South Asia Analysis Group/SAAG, 31 March 2019). The [popularity](#) of the government has taken a nose-dive, however, due to the (pre-COVID-19) economic downturn (SAAG, 15 February 2020). 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 as was shown when a journalist was given a [three-month sentence](#) in August 2018, calling into question the country's commitment to freedom of expression (The Diplomat, 28 August 2018).

Bhutan is busier watching foreign relations than dealing with internal politics. The June-August 2017 military stand-off between China and India, near the Doklam Plateau, was a foreshadowing of things to come and Bhutan decided to remain quiet and did nothing which could be perceived as taking sides. This has been seen as a wise decision, since Bhutan's survival may well depend upon balancing the needs and wishes of China and India. However, Bhutan's new [assertiveness](#) and willingness to invest in closer contact with China has certainly posed a major challenge for India (The Diplomat, 5 July 2019). That is, until July 2020, when China claimed a large piece of [Bhutanese state territory](#) as its own, amounting to around 11% of the whole of Bhutan (The Diplomat, 6 July 2020). Since the claimed territory would be an enclave with no direct connection to the rest of China, it would make the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh the next candidate to be disputed.

China has also been building village infrastructure on another part of [Bhutanese territory](#), thus tacitly claiming ownership of land for the Tibet Autonomous Region (Foreign Policy, 7 May 2021). The building of a whole village complex (named Gyalaphug in Tibetan or Jiuluobu in Chinese) is a significant new step. Located in mountainous terrain, the area is still internationally understood to belong to part of Lhuntse district in northern Bhutan. The Bhutanese government does not have the means to monitor this territory and even less to do anything about such Chinese construction-work. This step is arguably aimed not at Bhutan itself, but against its other big neighbor, India, and may well drive Bhutan back into its arms.

Bhutan's laws provide equal rights for men and women in relation to marriage, divorce and inheritance, although there is still preference in practice for inheritance to pass down the [female line](#) due to Bhutan's traditional matriarchal society (Alternative report by the Tarayana Foundation for the 44th CEDAW session, 2009). Early and forced marriages are banned and considered void (Marriage Act, Kha. 1-12). Despite this, 26% of girls are married by the age of 18 ([Girls Not Brides, 2021](#)). Girls are particularly vulnerable in the eastern region, especially in rural areas ([CEDAW, 2016](#)). In response, the government has launched various initiatives to try and end the practice ([UNICEF, 2016](#); [WHO, 2013](#)).

According to [OECD 2019](#): Whilst both genders have equal rights to initiate a divorce, the law does not grant men and women equal guardianship rights. For children under nine, custody is usually granted to the mother, and those over nine can decide which parent they live with. Divorce is reportedly easy to obtain and not associated with stigma. Whilst Bhutan has criminalized domestic violence (Domestic Violence Prevention Act, Section 4), there is no law that specifically addresses violence against women. The [CEDAW committee \(2016\)](#) highlighted this as an issue of particular concern, noting the prevalence of violence in the country and the underreporting of cases.

Religious landscape

| Bhutan: Religious context | Number of adherents | % |
|---|---------------------|------|
| Christians | 30,000 | 3.6 |
| Muslim | 2,074 | 0.2 |
| Hindu | 94,811 | 11.2 |
| Buddhist | 688,371 | 81.6 |
| Ethno-religionist | 28,048 | 3.3 |
| Jewish | 0 | 0.0 |
| Bahai | 119 | 0.0 |
| Atheist | 0 | 0.0 |
| Agnostic | 247 | 0.0 |
| Other | 0 | 0.0 |
| <i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i> | | |

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

Adapted according to OD-estimate

Most Christians come from a Nepalese background, many of whom are living in the south. According to the estimates in the WCD table above, 81.6% of the population practice different forms of Buddhism. The remaining segment of population mainly practices Hinduism (again, mostly of Nepalese origin), among them many migrant workers from India.

Bhutan has always been a Buddhist kingdom and is one of the last places where [Vajrayana Buddhism](#) is still practiced (Britannica, Vajrayana, accessed 17 December 2020), although its ties with neighboring India have always been strong and there is a significant Hindu minority in the country too. According to the [Constitution](#), Buddhism is not only the cultural, but also the spiritual heritage of the country. Although there is usually no official pressure to participate in Buddhist festivals or live according to traditional customs, citizens are expected to do so. This means that all deviants are met with suspicion, for example Christians. (This does not mean that they are expelled from their homes or lose access to community resources, but they do become social pariah.) Since the country's identity is linked to its cultural heritage, which is Buddhism, this causes the state to adopt an uncompromising approach towards non-Buddhist elements in Bhutanese society and to make a strong effort to assert the dominance of Buddhism in the country.

Christians living in the south are mainly of Nepalese ethnicity, many of whom are living among those who poured into Bhutan in the early 20th century. In the 1990s, more than 100,000 [refugees](#) fled Bhutan for Nepal (the so-called "southern question" concerning the Lhotshampa refugees) (SAAG, 26 July 2019). There are efforts to make repatriation agreements, but in the

meantime the situation has changed. According to reports (e.g. from the Bertelsmann Transition Index (BTI 2020), 90,000 refugees have already moved to third countries, particularly the USA, leaving "only" 6,500 refugees in Nepal at the beginning of 2021 (CIA Factbook). All this may be contributing to the government's hesitation to officially recognize Christians as a legal entity in Bhutan, despite informal promises that had been made by officials to legalize their status in the future. So far, the government has denied registration or legal status to Christian institutions; churches that applied for registration have continued to await approval from the government's Commission for Religious Organizations (CRO).

Economic landscape

According to [UNDP's full 2020 report](#) (page 343 onwards):

- **Gross National Income (2017 PPP USD):** 10,746
- **Rate of multidimensional poverty:** 14.7% in severe multidimensional poverty; an additional 17.7% of the population are vulnerable to it. 8.2% of the population are living below the national poverty line.
- **Remittances:** These make up 2.38% of the country's GDP.

According to World Bank data:

- Bhutan is classified as a lower middle income country, but is improving
- **GDP per capita (PPP constant international 2017 USD):** 11,832
- **GDP growth rate (2019):** 5.5%
- **Poverty gap at 5.50 USD a day (2011 PPP):** 12.3% (2017).

Bhutan is rich in resources and exports electricity to India, which contributes greatly to the state's income. Surprisingly, in a report published in April/May 2018, the World Health Organization (WHO) named the Bhutanese city of Pasakha as the [second most polluted city](#) in the world, exposing the price the country has to pay for exporting resources and a potential danger to its second most important income source, namely tourism (The Diplomat, 16 May 2018). Bhutan relies heavily on the tourist industry and Indian tourists have been visiting the country in increasing numbers. However, in recent years, Chinese tourists became the largest group. Understandably, the effects of the COVID-19 crisis were particularly strongly felt. Another development is a marked growth in the ownership of [private cars](#), a boom the country is ill-equipped for (Jakarta Post, 25 July 2019). The country is struggling to balance its advances in industry with the goal of preserving the [environment](#) (Al-Jazeera, 7 November 2018), it is, however, the only carbon-negative country in the world.

Trade depends greatly on India, since an estimated 80% of all goods are imported from India. While tourism is a way of "rubbing shoulders" with foreign cultures and of opening up, its importance is much more an economic factor: International tourists are obliged to spend a certain amount of money daily thus greatly contributing to the country's levels of hard currency. However, tourism always influences a country's traditions, a process Bhutan would prefer to avoid. The latest evidence for this could be seen in the strong opposition voiced against a proposal by the Ministry for Economic Affairs to lift the over 10 year old ban on issuing new bar

licenses. As a [comment](#) on the Kuensel website in 28 April 2021 shows, the reasoning behind such opposition was peppered with cultural and religious arguments. The country's "National Development Plan 2030", [presented](#) in June 2019, brings little innovation and basically serves to emphasize the importance of all the branches of industry mentioned above (SAAG, 31 July 2019). State-owned enterprises make up 50% of Bhutan's tax revenue and 85% of this revenue comes from hydropower. The Asian Development Bank is Bhutan's largest international development aid partner, helping the government to [implement projects](#) in alignment with the latter's five year programs (ADB, Bhutan Development Effectiveness Brief, October 2020).

According to BTI 2020:

- "In 2018, Bhutan met two of the three eligibility thresholds to graduate from the status of Least Developed Country (LDC) – the Gross National Income (GNI) Index and the Human Asset Index. Bhutan's GNI per capita of \$2,400 in March 2018 exceeded the required three-year average threshold of \$1,242. Bhutan also improved its Human Asset Index from 45 to 73 in 2018, as a result of higher secondary school enrollment. The government, however, requested that the country's graduation from LDC status be postponed until 2023 to better prepare the country for the shortfall in financial aid that would result from the loss of its LDC status."

The COVID-19 crisis has not affected Bhutan greatly from a health perspective. According to [WHO records](#) (accessed 17 December 2020), the country registered 440 infections in 2020 and managed to [vaccinate](#) 93% of its adult population in a mere 16 days (Channel News Asia, 12 April 2021). According to a [World Bank Press Release](#) published on 14 January 2021: "Bhutan's development philosophy of Gross National Happiness has contributed to impressive economic progress while safeguarding the nation's rich culture and environment. With the global economic downturn from COVID-19, Bhutan now faces significant challenges with slower economic growth and job losses on top of some vulnerabilities with rising youth unemployment, growing inequality and the impacts of climate change". Probably in acknowledgement of the country's success in dealing with the pandemic so far, Bhutan's minister of health, her Excellency Lyonpo Dechen Wangmo, has been elected as [President of the World Health Assembly](#), an organ of the WHO (The Diplomat, 15 June 2021).

Given how dependent Bhutan is on the tourist industry, an estimated 63% of households rely on tourism as their source of income, the economic fallout from the COVID crisis is far greater than the effect on public health, as Bhutan was effectively closed to all travel for several months. A [lockdown](#) imposed in August 2020 shows the seriousness of this challenge (Reuters, 11 August 2020). According to estimations from an economic taskforce within the country, it may take [five years](#) for Bhutan to bring tourism back to pre-pandemic level and 2021 will see only an estimated 10% of the normally expected tourist arrivals (South Asia Monitor, 25 January 2021).

Christians seeking employment face problems as they are a minority and often have to live in difficult economic and social circumstances. They are victims of discrimination and are short of alternatives. As many are working in the tourism sector, the COVID-19 crisis affects them disproportionately. Due to more limited employment and education opportunities, women and girls are amongst the most economically vulnerable ([UNDP, 2020](#)). Whilst it scores well in several

areas on [Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index \(2019/20\)](#), Bhutan scores poorly in relation to female financial inclusion.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [UNDP's full 2020 report](#) (page 343 onwards) and the CIA Factbook:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Ngalop (also known as Bhote) 50%, ethnic Nepalese 35% (predominantly Lhotshampas), indigenous or migrant tribes 15%
- **Main languages:** Sharchhopka 28%, Dzongkha (official) 24%, Lhotshamkha 22%, other 26% (includes foreign languages)
- **Urbanization rate:** 41.6%
- **Literacy rate is:** 66.6% (of population 15 years and older)
- **Mean years of schooling:** 4.1 years
- **Health and education indicators:** In Bhutan, 4.2 physicians and 17 hospital beds per 10,000 people are available, the pupil teacher ratio in primary school is 35:1

According to World Bank data:

- **Age:** 25.3% of the population are below the age of 14, 6.1% are above the age of 65
- **Education:** The primary school enrollment rate is 105.8%
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 3.7%; the rate of vulnerable employment is 72% (modeled ILO estimate)
- **IDPs/Refugees:** Bhutan has an observer status in the UN's IOM, there is no data available.

According to the UN Global Human Development Indicators (HDI 2020):

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a score of 0.654, Bhutan ranks 129th out of 189 countries. While data collection for Bhutan only started for the HDI 2010, Bhutan's development has been fast, but slowed down since 2017.
- **Life expectancy:** 71.8 years
- **Median age:** 28.1 years
- **Gini coefficient:** 37.4
- **Gender inequality:** With a score of 0.421, Bhutan scores 99th in a list of 162 countries on the Gender Inequality Index. The mean years of schooling for boys is 4.8, compared to 3.3 for girls. Also indicating a gender gap, the labor force participation rate is 58.9% for women, compared to 73.4% for men.
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 2.3% and 71.5% of the population are in vulnerable employment. The rate of unemployed youth is 10.5%

According to the CIA Factbook, 22% of the population are today of Nepalese ethnicity (mainly the Lhotshampas), but some estimates run as high as 40%. Some Bhutanese are of tribal origin, others are either ethnic Tibetan or are of Tibetan and South Asian origin. As Bhutanese life is closely connected with the Buddhist religion and culture, anyone not adhering to Buddhism is watched with suspicion.

Bhutan has experienced a strong positive development in almost all the relevant international indices measuring social and economic development. Although investment in education has increased over recent years, and the average years a child stays at school has increased as well, the literacy rate is still low. The government is struggling to offer the younger generation good career prospects, even though Bhutan has tried to diversify its economy, strengthen exports and open up to the world. Still, many youth opt to go to India to advance their education and career opportunities. Given how closely the Bhutanese economy is tied to the Indian, each Indian economic downturn is strongly felt in the country, too. This was particularly noticeable in the COVID-19 crisis, too, since India was heavily affected by the pandemic, particularly in 2021. On 23 June 2021, the World Bank announced it is granting Bhutan a [35 million USD Development Policy Credit](#) to help the country alleviate the health, social and economic impact of COVID-19 (World Bank Press Release, 23 June 2021).

Despite all efforts to combat the problem, there is a shortage of skilled labor and the government had to relax its self-set ceiling limiting the number of migrant workers in order to cope with the demand for labor in hydropower projects. In 2017, there were an estimated 53,000 [migrant workers](#) in Bhutan, predominantly from India (Kuensel, 18 May 2017).

Bhutan is famous for its [Gross National Happiness Index](#) (OPHI, accessed 17 December 2020). Bhutan's happiness is not without its challenges, however, and mental disorders and illnesses not only seem to be on the rise, but also continue to be [stigmatized](#) (The Diplomat, 2 November 2018). Another challenge is the [increasing number of drug addicts](#). (Foreign Policy, 26 September 2019). In December 2020, both houses of Bhutan's parliament took steps to [decriminalize](#) homosexuality, much to the praise of human rights activists (Reuters, 10 December 2020).

There is barely a public social security net in Bhutan and assistance comes mainly from the (wider) family or from royal donations. This means that emergency help and also support (in the case of unemployment due to the COVID-19 crisis) generally comes from the family, not the state. This poses an additional challenge for those Christian converts who are the only ones in their family. But even if a whole family joined the Christian faith, they would very likely be excluded from community support.

Bhutan's society has historically been described as both patriarchal and matriarchal ([Priyadarshini V. Women in Bhutan, Indian History Congress 2014](#); [Catalyst, 15 April 2019](#)). Whilst women face little institutional discrimination, social and cultural norms contribute to gender inequality. The [CEDAW Committee \(2016\)](#) highlighted that women assumed a disproportionate workload of domestic duties, and that harmful stereotypes restricted women's opportunities in political, economic and social life. There is widespread acceptance of domestic violence, which increased during the COVID-19 crisis ([South Asia Monitor, 11 May 2020](#); [World Bank blog, 2 December 2020](#)).

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2021):

- **Internet usage:** 69.0% penetration – survey date: June 2021
- **Facebook usage:** 67.2% penetration – survey date: June 2021
According to [Napoleon Cat](#), in 2008 58.1% of Facebook users were male, compared to 41.9% of women.

According to World Bank:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 93.3 per 100 people

According to a 2018 media report, the number of Internet subscriptions in Bhutan crossed the 720,000 threshold over [the whole country](#) (BBS, 27 May 2018). This will include households having more than one subscription, given that the country has just 844,000 inhabitants. But the ubiquitous use of smartphones means that most Bhutanese have access to the Internet, especially those living in or near the capital. The country is struggling with many unwanted changes to the traditional way of life which accompany the process of [modernization](#) (Business Insider, 7 August 2018). Christians benefit from the increasing connections to the outside world, too.

Security situation

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 stronger. The June-August 2017 standoff between India and China concerning the Doklam Plateau border region, was very close to a very sensitive region for India, known as the "Chicken neck". Chinese troops began moving south into what Bhutan considers its territory accompanied by construction vehicles and road-building equipment, causing Bhutan to call in Indian troops for [help](#) (The Guardian, 6 July 2017). Bhutan refrained from escalating tensions. It seems that the most recent territorial claims made by China in July 2020 as well as the unannounced building of a whole village and infrastructure on Bhutanese territory (referred to above in *Political and legal landscape*) were actually signals directed more to India than to Bhutan and it is too early to say whether they pose a serious security threat to Bhutan. However, Bhutan is in no position to do anything about it. Bhutan is the only country bordering China with which Beijing does not maintain formal diplomatic relations due to India's substantial influence. While maintaining close relations with India, Bhutan has so far [avoided offending China](#) and recently entered into official boundary talks (The Hindu, 14 October 2021).

There is also the unsolved situation concerning the Nepalese minority and the "Southern question" (mentioned above in *Religious landscape*). This does not seem to have the potential to cause any escalation in the current security situation and the number of people affected is slowly decreasing as well.

Christians are not facing any special challenges from the general security situation.

Trends analysis

1) The government is introducing greater civil freedoms selectively

The Bhutanese government fears that greater civil freedoms might result in divisions and unrest within the country, however, it is recognizing change as is illustrated by its move to decriminalize homosexuality, referred to above. Its continuing dependence on tourism also means exposure to outside influence, which can lead to resistance and unrest by those who want to preserve Bhutanese culture and religion (see also below: *Trend 3*). Due to its geostrategic vulnerability, such unrest could be exploited by foreign forces. Such fears can quickly grow in the difficult economic environment the country finds itself in. So far, the government's explanation about the registration of religious groups (stated before the UN in September 2019) did not translate into less pressure for Christians on the ground.

2) The balancing act between India and China gets more challenging

Bhutan is a tiny land-locked country sandwiched between China and India. Whereas China has tried to make 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. And Bhutan will have to step up its game, as the country threatens to become just a [pawn on the chessboard](#) as China and India battle it out (The Diplomat, 23 July 2020). The Chinese inroads have become very visible in the WWL 2022 reporting period, when China built a whole village and infrastructure on [Bhutanese territory](#) (Foreign Policy, 7 May 2021). As Foreign Policy reports, 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. Bhutan has since agreed with China to a "[three-step roadmap](#)" for boundary talks (The Hindu, 14 October 2021).

3) There are indications that Buddhism might be losing significance

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 enrolments to monastic institutions which might indicate that Buddhism is losing significance. This would be a severe threat to the country's culture and tradition. 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.

However, in the near future, 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). Also, the economic hardships people are experiencing due to the COVID-19 crisis, might cause a renewed emphasis on religion, meaning Buddhism.

External Links - Keys to understanding

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- Political and legal landscape: trekked the country - <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/bhutan-kings-treks-mountains-covid-19-measures-15090548>
- Political and legal landscape: track record - <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/2443>
- Political and legal landscape: popularity - <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/2569>
- Political and legal landscape: three-month sentence - <https://thedi diplomat.com/2018/08/when-freedom-of-expression-isnt-free-journalism-facebook-and-censorship-in-bhutan/>
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- Economic landscape: second most polluted city - <https://thedi diplomat.com/2018/05/bhutans-happiness-faces-the-growing-pains-of-development/>
- Economic landscape: private cars - <https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2019/07/24/car-boom-brings-gridlock-misery-to-green-and-happy-bhutan.html>
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WWL 2022: Church information / Bhutan

Christian origins

The first contact with Christians can be traced back to Jesuit missionaries arriving at Paro as early as 1626. However, these Portuguese missionaries could not get established. Bhutan remained officially closed to Christianity (as well as to all other external influences) until just before the failed coup in 1964/1965. In October 1963, the Canadian Jesuit priest, [William Mackey](#), was invited by the king and prime minister to take up residence and set up an English-language school system as part of a series of modernization efforts, and stayed until his death in 1995. Sources name 1965 as the date when church activity became visible and started to grow.

Church spectrum

No details are available for publication.

External Links - Church information

- Christian origins: William Mackey - https://web.archive.org/web/20070823171120/http://www.nieparo.edu.bt/WebPages/Publications/The_Call/4_How_It_All_Began.pdf

WWL 2022: Persecution Dynamics / Bhutan

Reporting period

1 October 2020 - 30 September 2021

Position on the World Watch List

| Bhutan: World Watch List | Points | WWL Rank |
|--------------------------|--------|----------|
| WWL 2022 | 67 | 34 |
| WWL 2021 | 64 | 43 |
| WWL 2020 | 61 | 45 |
| WWL 2019 | 64 | 33 |
| WWL 2018 | 62 | 33 |

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2018-2022 reporting periods

The increase in score by 3 points in WWL 2022 was caused by an increase of the violence score, which contributed more than half to the overall increase. While persecution has never been very violent in the country, in this reporting period, a few incidents did occur. For security reasons, no details can be given. The *National sphere of life* increased strongest. Pressure remains on a comparable level in all *spheres of life*, reflecting in particular the continued difficulties faced by

Christian converts from Buddhism or ethnic-animist religion. They are not recognized in society and are therefore often shunned by fellow citizens and denied official documents by the authorities. Christian children 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 | Weak |
| 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)

A continuing emphasis on [Mahayana Buddhism](#) as the country's spiritual heritage makes life hard for the Christian minority. Bhutan had been a Buddhist kingdom for centuries. 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, which often includes a Buddhist temple and accommodation for monks.

And it is not just government authorities emphasizing Buddhism; for converts, neighbors, friends and their own families can become another source of pressure. No Christian congregation has ever been allowed to build a church structure yet. All Christian fellowships remain underground. 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.

Clan oppression (Weak)

Another source of pressure comes from shamans following the traditional animistic *Bön* belief. Although most citizens are not adherents to this faith exclusively, they will observe certain rites and traditions, especially in rural areas. This relates for example to festivals or outstanding events in family life (such as a birth or a death). Converts to Christianity who do not wish to participate in these rites and traditions will be put under pressure and face opposition and exclusion. The fusion of tribal belief and Buddhism has also been a source of persecution, especially in the central and eastern parts of the country.

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. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Religious nationalism - Buddhist

- **Extended family (Very strong):** For converts, family members are by far 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 still 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 (and even Hindu) leaders are also drivers of persecution. They see themselves first and foremost as preservers of Bhutan's Buddhist culture and heritage (or the Hindu minority). They put strong pressure on converts to reconvert. Christians in general are perceived as "newcomers" and a disturbance.
- **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 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. Likewise, all political parties back the government policy on preserving and protecting Buddhism.

- **Citizens (Medium):** Especially in the rural areas, society is closely-knit and any deviation is perceived as wrong and as disturbing the harmony. Therefore, not only family puts pressure on converts, but friends, neighbors and work colleagues as well.

Drivers of Clan oppression

- **Extended family (Very strong):** The merging of ethnic beliefs with Buddhism causes additional possibilities for persecution; Christians refusing to follow both Buddhist beliefs and ethnic traditional rites are more likely to get into difficulties. This is especially true for converts' families, who will try everything to bring them back to the family faith and if nothing else works, expel them.
- **Citizens (Medium):** Not only family members put pressure on converts to recant; this will also be done by friends, neighbors and work colleagues.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

There are no geographical hotspots of persecution in Bhutan.

Christian communities and how they are affected

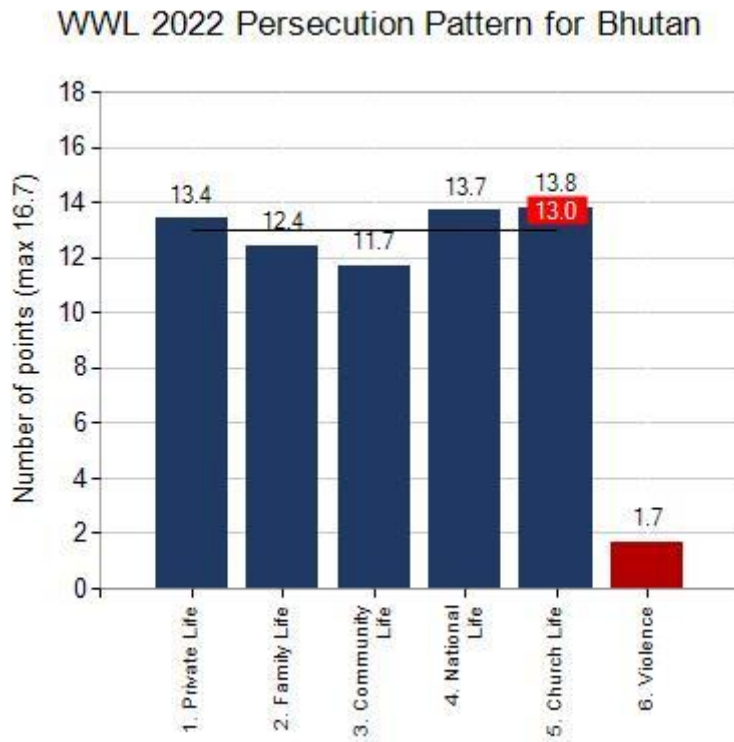
Communities of expatriate Christians: The very few expatriate Christians can only obtain a limited visa and are not able to join the existing house churches. They are therefore involuntarily isolated and scored as a separate WWL category.

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](#) during the WWL 2021 reporting period (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.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2022 Persecution pattern for Bhutan shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Bhutan is very high and increased from 12.7 points in WWL 2021 to 13.0 in WWL 2022.
- 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 Christians face pressure in the *National* and *Church spheres*. This pressure is fueled by the Christian minority continuing to be sidelined in everyday life and lacking official recognition.
- The score for violence against Christians increased to 1.7 points in WWL 2022. While violence is at a low level compared to many other countries on the WWL, this increase contributed more than half of the overall rise in total score. For security reasons, not details can be given.

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 2021 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://openodoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.75 points)

Conversion is banned according to Section 463 (A) of the country's Penal Code but is unclearly defined (see above: *Political and legal landscape*), which gives the authorities and ethnic and religious leaders leverage to put pressure on converts. For converts, the pressure from family and community is arguably strongest; conversion is frowned upon and a Christian convert can be pushed to the margins of society - or even outside it.

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

Christians avoid displaying Christian images when they are in public. Even churches do not display Christian symbols in public since it might provoke a negative reaction from nationalist and radical Buddhists. Whereas the Internet gives at least the illusion of the possibility of camouflage, wearing Christian symbols directly exposes Christians, so only rarely do they display Christian symbols in their houses or wear them, as it increases the risk of identifying, profiling and monitoring them.

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.50 points)

The aforementioned Section 463 (A) of the country's Penal Code applies to this situation as well. As all conversions are strictly opposed by family, community, religious authorities and the state, even the distribution of a simple tract (without having a discussion about the Christian faith or inviting a person to a church meeting) can be a reason for arrest. Due to the anti-conversion law, Christians tend to talk about their faith only inside churches or at home and only with people they know well and trust. When someone converts, they usually try to hide the fact in public and meet discreetly with Christian friends for fellowship and learning.

Block 1.9: It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians. (3.50 points)

It has been reported that members of the intelligence service are known to monitor Christians and note down who attends meetings. Since pressure is always very high and known Christians are monitored, a country expert explained: "Christians exercise a lot of self-restraint and if they meet, they do it in a discreet way" and without displaying Christian symbols. If they did make their presence too obvious, it could lead to the owner of the rented house terminating their rent-contract.

Block 1 - additional information

None.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

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

The anti-conversion law (see above: *Block 1.1*) can be understood in such a way that a citizen's baptism is the ultimate proof of "inducement". Baptisms are therefore always done in secret, away from the eyes of the authorities and non-Christian religious leaders, only with a few witnesses and frequently at night and in remote areas.

Block 2.5: Burials of Christians have been hindered or coercively performed with non-Christian rites. (4.00 points)

Christian funerals are very difficult to arrange and are often impossible due to being hindered by non-Christian family members, relatives, society and the authorities. In the WWL 2022 reporting period, a Christian buried according to Christian rites had to re-buried three weeks later after a friend was able to purchase a piece of private land for a grave. Often, even this is not possible; Christian burial is strongly opposed by religious leaders and the community. In many cases, the deceased have to be buried in isolated locations in the jungle far away from the village, frequently at night. If they can afford it, many Christians bury their deceased in neighboring India. Even if a burial is allowed to take place on a private plot of land, every crisis or disaster in the village will be blamed on the Christians.

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (4.00 points)

A country expert reported: "The education curriculum is state-regulated and standard for all. The compulsory Dzongkha subject at higher secondary level is exclusively Buddhist Dharma. Now the schools have introduced Buddhist teachings and special classes in many schools during holidays or break to engage children in Buddhist values. The entire curriculum is based on Buddhism, history, values and traditions." Children of Christians face opposition from teachers and pupils at school and are frequently bullied. Christian children are even made to participate in daily morning and evening Buddhist prayer and annual rituals under very strict observation and they are often given things to eat which have been offered to idols. Every school and college in Bhutan has a Buddhist shrine, prayer wheel and prayer hall, and Christian schoolchildren can be forced to clean a shrine with all its statues and bow down in worship. Buddhist Lamas visits all schools and other educational institutions regularly and all students have to be present. They are supposed to bless each child by touching its head, a ceremony no-one can opt out from.

Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (3.75 points)

Children of Christians are often confused because the values taught at home are so different to the ones taught in schools and society. Expressing one's religion openly is out of the question and children learn from the surrounding society to think it is illegal or morally wrong to be Christian. Because of the high surveillance and prevailing risk, there is a lack of good Sunday schools and Christian materials for children who are very much influenced by the local community. As the churches are very young and often lack unity and discipleship, they are hardly

able to equip the children with Christian values because of the increasing restrictions. Christian families find this very difficult, too. Children of Christians often do not want to follow their parents' faith because of the peer pressure and discrimination they experience from teachers. They try to find compromises in fear of the consequences they are facing.

Block 2 - additional information

Once converts are discovered, they can face the threat of divorce (if married) and lose inheritance rights. They can also be declared mentally ill by their immediate family. Many Christians do not get issued with an electronic National Identity Card because of their religion, and especially converts face this problem. 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. Christians sometimes have a hard time obtaining the NOC and are threatened with being deleted from the census records. The census form requires citizens to indicate their religious affiliation.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (4.00 points)

Especially in villages, Christians are expected to contribute to Buddhist activities, like anybody else. Villagers often make life very difficult for Christians: If they do not attend festivals and contribute towards them (in money or otherwise), this will trigger more harassment from the community. Even in urban areas, if the locality is conducting ceremonies, Christians will be asked for donations or participation. Buddhism plays an integral role in the national identity and in every aspect of Bhutanese life. Even at the workplace, there are Buddhist rituals and Buddhist prayers and everyone is expected to participate. A country expert reported: "Christians are seen as people who are adopting the Western culture, so they are monitored more to comply with the traditional culture. Several ceremonies and celebrations are purposely scheduled on Sundays. The situation puts a lot of pressure on Christians because not only authorities but also the community is very much active in monitoring them."

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)

Because of a prevalent fear of conversion, Christians active in ministry are being particularly closely monitored, which may even mean that their phone is tapped and social media use under observation. There are many incidents of Christian activity being reported to the authorities by the local community. There are rumors of the government appointing and paying local people to spy on Christians, although this is difficult to prove.

Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

Most employers are biased against Christians and will bypass them when they apply for employment or promotion. As many jobs need government licenses or a non-objection certificate (NOC), Christians often hide their faith in order not to jeopardize the process. Known Christians are also left out of subsidy schemes set up by the government. There have also been reports of Christians being dismissed because they witnessed about their faith at the workplace or simply because their Christian faith became known.

Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

When Christians are reported to the authorities because of the anti-conversion law, they are called to the police station and interrogated. Villagers keep watch on the visitors in rural areas and their host may be interrogated afterwards. It is frequently the purpose for the visit which is being asked. Even if the answers prove satisfactory, they will be closely watched by the police and by suspicious neighbors. A country expert added: "During the Christmas season, interrogations are more common and the census was also conducted to find out the number of Christians in some areas. It is not uncommon that officers go from house to house for seeking details of other Christians." In the reporting period of WWL 2022, after interrogation, a Christian was held in custody under false accusations. As per law, all gatherings have to be reported beforehand to the authorities and a permit has to be secured so it can take place. Therefore, all house church meetings can be considered illegal assemblies and organizers have often been summoned to speak with the police and, at times, to intelligence officers visiting churches.

Block 3 - additional information

One of the farm-traditions in Bhutan is community planting and harvesting. However, Christians are excluded from this and cannot count on any help. In rural areas, the water supply is usually communal and Christians are often isolated and excluded from it. 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 to obtain such letters. And if they succeed, their children face discrimination in school by being given lower grades, which in turn makes it difficult for them to qualify for higher education.

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 state religion. On 24 May 2011, the government enacted an amendment to the law and inserted an anti-conversion clause. Section 463 (B) of the Penal Code (Amendment) Act of Bhutan 2011 states: "The offense of compelling others to belong to another faith shall be a misdemeanour", which is punishable by a sentence of up to three years in prison. See above: *Political and legal landscape*.

Block 4.3: Christians have been forced by law or in practice to act against their conscience, e.g. regarding military service or in certain professions. (4.00 points)

As Buddhism is so deeply ingrained in every aspect of social life, it is practically impossible for Christians to live in Bhutan without acting against their beliefs and conscience, be it in the armed forces, in public service, at school, at the workplace or in wider society. Everything is interwoven with Buddhist rituals, prayers and ceremonies and there is high pressure and a high need to blend in.

Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (4.00 points)

As one country expert said: "The Commission for Religious Organization (CRO), which is the State authority that provides registration for religious organizations, does not easily recognize non-Buddhist organizations." So far, no Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been permitted. Not only the government, but also society in general would block any attempts at establishing them.

Block 4.12: Christians, churches or Christian organizations have been hindered in publicly displaying religious symbols. (4.00 points)

Being a church in Bhutan means almost exclusively being a house-church. As such, they cannot put up any Christian symbols that can be seen in public. As already indicated, in most cases, Christians meet in rented houses, which is an additional reason why no religious symbols can be displayed. Finally, it has to be remembered that Bhutan has laid down standards of architectural style in its building code, in order to protect tradition and tourism.

Block 4 - additional information

Christianity is portrayed as looking mainly for conversions of "vulnerable people". As an article from the main newspaper Kuensel in March 2020 [stated](#): "After Buddhism, a sizable proportion of Bhutan's citizens practice Hinduism. We had no problems as the two religions co-existed harmoniously. There is a growing concern of conversion to Christianity. Again, if it is by choice, it should not worry us. The problem is when people are forced or when it is politicized." Although the article also states that Bhutanese should be proud of their right to choose their faith, the very beginning of the article sounds like the correction of a mistake: "The ceremony was simple, no match to the significance, when two villagers, a brother and his sister, were re-converted to the faith they belonged." This shows a prevailing mindset in the country.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (4.00 points)

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government banned mass gatherings, but even before that, Christian house-churches had always been watched. As per the law, all such gatherings are to be reported in advance to the authorities and a permit must be issued before any meeting takes place. Intelligence officers visit churches and Christian leaders from time to time, asking details

about the church gatherings on the lookout for any conversions taking place. If there is evidence of conversions taking place, they will target the church leader and monitor him to find out if he is guilty of proselytizing. A country expert added: "The government has put Dessuups (King's volunteers) close to every church in every town where Christians meet for prayers/fellowships. Hence, it is becoming harder for Christian leaders to visit Christians in other Districts."

Block 5.2: It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government. (4.00 points)

At present, there is not a single Christian group which is officially recognized in the country. Registration continues to be the biggest problem for churches in Bhutan. Without registration they are technically illegal. Although the national government says that Christians may gather and the leaders of the Bhutan Christian Society continue to approach the government for legal recognition, fellowships are disrupted by villagers or their legality questioned at district and village level. Christians engaging with the authorities on matters of religion and worship are routinely discriminated against. Christian groups who seek registration with and frequently appeal to the Commission of Religious Organizations (CRO) simply do not hear back from them. As mentioned above (see: *Recent history*), in September 2019 the government stated (as part of the country's Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council): "Religious groups are free to practice without registering". However, this statement has not translated into more freedom for Christians or other minorities.

Block 5.13: Churches have been hindered in importing Christian materials from abroad. (4.00 points)

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.

Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (4.00 points)

Bhutanese citizens and government officials see it as a duty to protect the Buddhist history and identity of the country. As they see it, Christians willfully reject this identity and act as traitors. Therefore, speaking up against persecution will not be accepted and in fact, strongly opposed. The main accusation against Christians is that they are selling their souls for foreign dollars who coerce conversions by bribery. Any association with foreign or international churches is therefore highly dangerous as it can be used to falsely blame Christians.

Block 5 - additional information

Since Christianity has no official or legal status, initiatives related to humanitarian activities cannot be taken. No such organization or institution related to a church exists in the country. As social organizations and charities are maintained by the royal families in Bhutan, they may even be perceived as competition and Christian volunteers can even be targeted.

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 5 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. For further discussion (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor's article dated 13 November 2013 available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

4. 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.

5. The symbol "x" in the table: This denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security concerns.

| Bhutan: Violence Block question | | WWL 2022 | WWL 2021 |
|---------------------------------|---|----------|----------|
| 6.1 | How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)? | 0 | 0 |
| 6.2 | How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons? | x | 0 |
| 6.3 | How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons? | x | 0 |
| 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? | 0 | 0 |
| 6.5 | How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)? | 0 | 0 |
| 6.6 | How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons? | 0 | 0 |
| 6.7 | How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians? | 0 | 0 |
| 6.8 | How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)? | x | 0 |
| 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? | 0 | 0 |
| 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? | 0 | 0 |
| 6.11 | How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons? | 0 | 0 |
| 6.12 | How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons? | 0 | 0 |

Persecution in Bhutan has never been particularly violent, since the authorities prefer to use other, less visible means against Christians. As the table above shows, there have been a few violent incidents recorded in the WWL 2022 reporting period of WWL 2022, despite the fact that the COVID-19 crisis made obtaining reports difficult.

5 Year trends

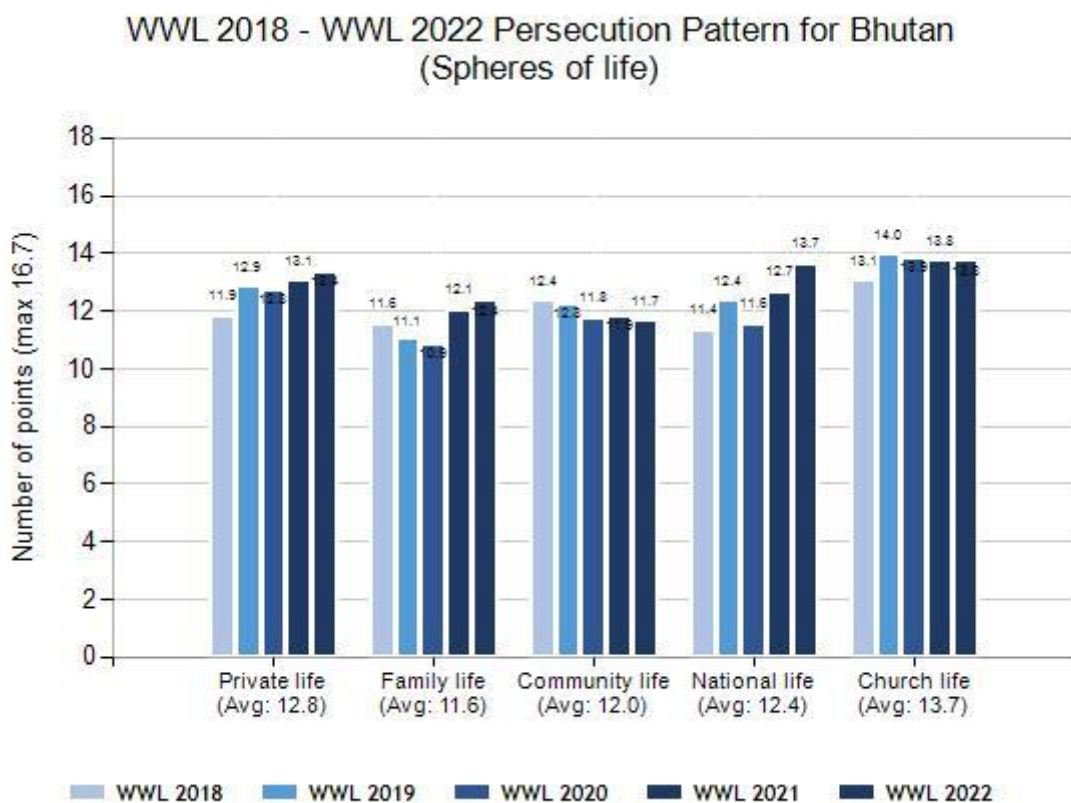
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

| Bhutan: WWL 2018 - WWL 2022 Persecution Pattern history | Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life |
|--|---|
| 2022 | 13.0 |
| 2021 | 12.7 |
| 2020 | 12.2 |
| 2019 | 12.5 |
| 2018 | 12.1 |

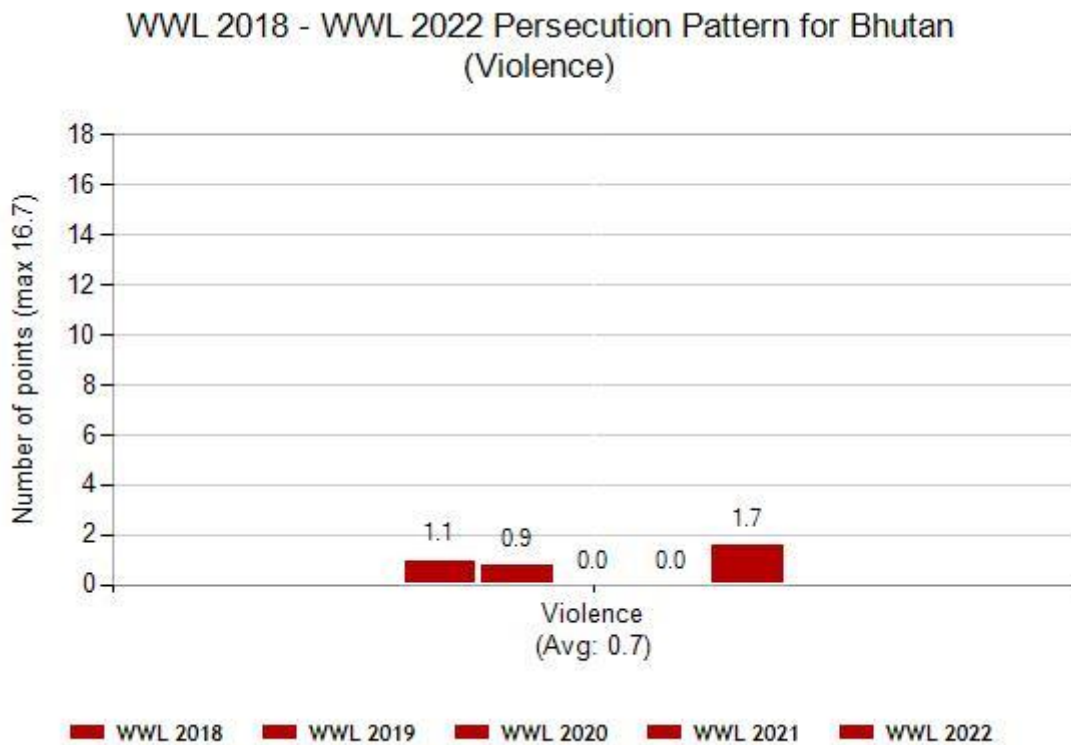
Since WWL 2018, the average pressure has been consistent above 12.0 points, rising to 13.0 points in WWL 2022 .

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 *Private* and *National life*. The *Private*, *Family* and *National spheres* reached new heights of pressure in WWL 2022, reflecting the fact that due to the pandemic, converts were confined more to their homes, where social control is often higher and easier to carry out.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



The chart reflects the fact that persecution has never been very violent in Bhutan and the score has usually been at a very low level. Despite the notable increase in WWL 2022, the low scores reflect the fact that it is difficult to get reports on incidents out of the country.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

| Group | Female Pressure Points |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Economic | Denied inheritance or possessions |
| Political and Legal | Forced divorce; Forced marriage |
| Security | - |
| Social and Cultural | Violence – psychological |
| Technological | - |

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 (OECD, 2019, “Social Institutions and Gender Index: Bhutan”). While there were no reported instances of forced divorce in the WWL 2022 reporting period, this remains an ongoing risk for converts. Christian women married to non-Christians are also socially under pressure to stay with their husbands despite 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. “There is a common belief that when a woman marries a man, she has to follow the man’s religion,” explains an expert. For single converts, the possibility of being pressured into marriage is a tangible threat, although no such instances have been reported in the WWL 2022 reporting period.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

| Group | Male Pressure Points |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Economic | Denied inheritance or possessions |
| Political and Legal | - |
| Security | - |
| Social and Cultural | Violence – psychological |
| Technological | - |

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 often experience persecution through families, being disowned by their family, asked to leave the family home, and losing inheritance. 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 work place. 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 2020):

- “The government’s Commission for Religious Organizations (CRO) approved 14 religious groups during the year, but none from religious minority groups. Hindu leaders cited continued public support for the construction of Hindu temples from the highest level of government, including the new temple in the capital in 2019. ... Leaders from the Hindu

Dharmic Samudai, one of eight religious organizations on the board of the CRO, cited strong official support for Hindu religious practice, including royal support for the construction of Hindu temples and participation in Hindu religious ceremonies and festivals." (page 1)

- "The CRO approved 14 religious groups during the year, but none were from religious minorities. There are approximately 140 Buddhist groups, two Hindu groups, and no Christian groups registered by the government." (page 5)

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. As one 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.

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Religious nationalism - Buddhist

In a situation where Bhutan needs to show its own unique place in the region, even more so now that it has become a pawn in a bigger game between its giant neighbors India and China, it is very likely that it will do so by emphasizing its exceptional religious and cultural heritage (distinguishing itself from both neighbors). As far as civil rights are concerned, the sentencing of a journalist in August 2018 does not point to a more open policy. The government's statement in Geneva in September 2019 concerning the registration of religious organizations (see above: *Recent history*) seems to have been more political-strategic rhetoric than representing a change on the ground. As the economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis continue to unfold, it is possible that greater emphasis will be laid on Buddhist heritage and religious affiliation (see above: *Trends 3*). This would mean an even more difficult situation for the Christian minority and especially for converts.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: Mahayana Buddhism - <http://www.religionfacts.com/mahayana>
- 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>
- Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere: stated - <https://kuenselonline.com/choosing-our-own-faith/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: matriarchal - <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44158477>

- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: easy to procure - <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/BT.pdf>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: female line - <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/960591468017989867/pdf/ACS45510PNTOP10Box0379884B00PUBLIC0.pdf>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on World Watch Research's Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) and on the World Watch Monitor website:

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Bhutan>
- <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/Bhutan>