

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2025

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

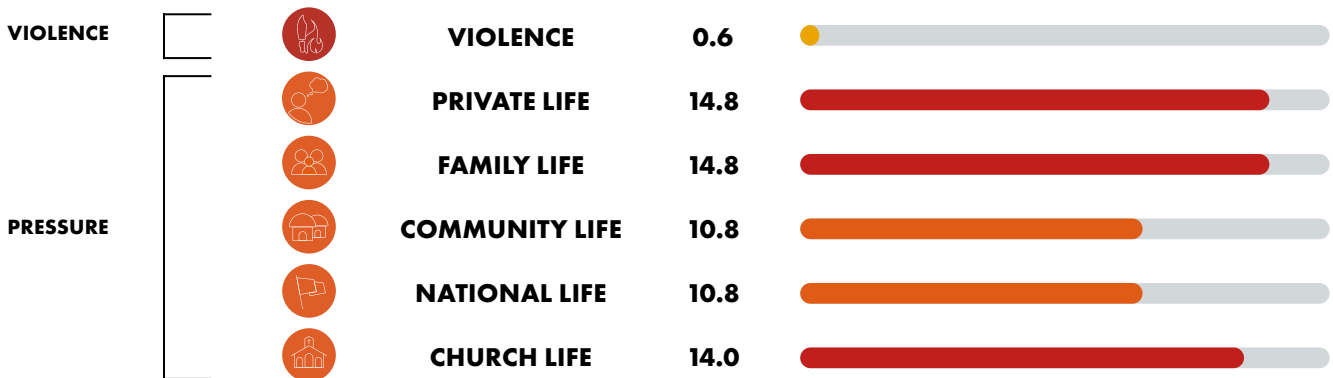
## BRUNEI

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**48**



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### LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



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

## Key findings

Converts from Islam face pressure from their families and communities and conversion is punishable by Sharia Penal Law if a case is brought against them, even though cases have not become known in the reporting period. Everything will be done to bring converts back to their original faith. Non-traditional Christian communities cannot be registered as churches, but to operate legally they are registered as companies, societies, or family centers. As such, they are treated as secular organizations and are required to submit their financial and operational reports to the government every year. The whole of society (Christians included) is affected by the continuing introduction of Sharia laws specifically the [establishment of mandatory Islamic education](#) incorporated into the general studies of children as young as 3 years old.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

Sultan of Brunei Hassanal Bolkiah

### POPULATION

456,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

55,600<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Absolute Monarchy or Sultanate



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## Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	55,600	12.2
Muslims	267,000	58.6
Ethnic religionists	44,900	9.8
Buddhists	43,400	9.5

Source<sup>2</sup>

In Brunei, the Sultan rules as an [absolute monarch](#). People deeply respect the Sultan and there is little demand for more political participation.

The national philosophy is Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB), a blend of Malay and Islamic cultural values, guarded by the monarchy. May 2014 saw the introduction of the Sharia Penal Code (which also applies to non-Muslims); however, [implementation did not happen until 2019](#). So far, [no cases](#) against religious minorities have been reported.

Ethnically, Malay Bruneians comprise 57% of the population and are presumed to be Muslim. The Chinese population is Buddhist and Christian (Christians make up 12% of the overall population). Christians are free to worship, although church leaders are under constant surveillance and preaching is monitored.

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

## How the situation varies by region

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

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

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

## Who is affected?

### COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

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

### HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

This includes the Roman Catholic and Anglican Church. They are strictly monitored and must exercise caution in ensuring they do not criticize the Sultan, though they experience less pressure than newer Protestant groups and converts.

### CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

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

### NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

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



## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### ISLAMIC OPPRESSION BLENDED WITH DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

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



## How are men and women differently affected?

### WOMEN

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

#### Female typical pressure points:

- Denied custody of children
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced marriage
- Violence – psychological

### MEN

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

#### Male typical pressure points:

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

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2025	48	66
2024	44	66
2023	46	65
2022	46	64
2021	39	64

Although the average pressure rose very slightly (reaching 13.1 points), the score for violence fell from 1.3 points in WWL 2024 to just 0.6 of a point. Persecution in Brunei has never been particularly violent. The decrease in the violence score can be attributed to a decline in the number of Christians who have faced physical or mental abuse for faith-related reasons, as well as fewer Christians being forced to leave the country for their beliefs. However, overall levels of persecution remain high, leading to significant self-censorship and forcing converts to go into hiding. A notable development contributing to the slight increase in average pressure is the introduction of new educational reforms that mandate Islamic education for all students in government, private, and international institutions.



## Examples of violence in the reporting period

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

WWL Year	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed
2025	1
2024	1

*This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the country's corresponding WWL Persecution Dynamics. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10\*, 100\* or 1000\*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000\*, 100,000\* and 1,000,000\*.*

### PRIVATE LIFE

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

### FAMILY LIFE

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

### COMMUNITY LIFE

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

receiving 1,000 BN\$ per year for 10 years. Islamic missionary (dawah) efforts are widely publicized and celebrated in national newspapers, where converts are announced with their new names.

### NATIONAL LIFE

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

### CHURCH LIFE

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

# International obligations & rights violated

**Brunei has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under the following international treaties:**

1. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
2. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

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

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

## Situation of other religious minorities

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

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2023 Brunei):

- “The government permitted members of non-Muslim religious minorities to practice their faiths but continued to ban religious groups it considered “deviant,” including the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, the Bahai Faith, and Jehovah’s Witnesses.”
- “Members of non-Sunni religious groups continued to report that some individuals seeking to convert to another religion feared social retribution, such as ostracism by friends, family, and their community. Some non-Muslims said they experienced pressure in the workplace or in social groups to convert to Islam. While the Sharia Penal Code outlined harsh punishments for Muslims converting to another religion, there were no cases reported during the

year in which the government applied or carried out those penalties. Non-Muslim groups reported that government officials monitored their religious services and events to ensure that no Muslims attended and that there was no anti-Islamic content.”



## Open Doors in Brunei

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



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## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

- The content of this document is based on the more detailed WWL Persecution Dynamics per country published annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2025 Open Doors International.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the WWL Persecution Dynamics per country, accompanying Background Information per country and the latest update of WWL Methodology. These are also available at the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).
- The WWL 2025 reporting period was 01 October 2023 – 30 September 2024.

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