

World  
Watch  
Research

## Bhutan: Full Country Dossier

January 2023



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

January 2023

© Open Doors International

[research@od.org](mailto:research@od.org)

# Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
World Watch List 2023 .....	3
Copyright note.....	4
Sources and definitions.....	4
<b>WWL 2023 Situation in brief / Bhutan .....</b>	<b>5</b>
Brief country details .....	5
Map of country.....	5
Dominant persecution engines and drivers .....	6
Brief description of the persecution situation .....	6
Summary of international obligations and rights violations.....	6
Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period .....	6
External Links - Situation in brief .....	6
<b>WWL 2023: Keys to understanding / Bhutan.....</b>	<b>7</b>
Links for general background information.....	7
Recent history .....	7
Political and legal landscape .....	8
Religious landscape .....	10
Economic landscape.....	11
Social and cultural landscape.....	13
Technological landscape .....	15
Security situation .....	15
Trends analysis.....	16
External Links - Keys to understanding .....	17
<b>WWL 2023: Church information / Bhutan.....</b>	<b>19</b>
Christian origins.....	19
Church spectrum today.....	19
Areas where Christians face most difficulties .....	19
Christian communities and how they are affected .....	19
External Links - Church information.....	20
<b>WWL 2023: Persecution Dynamics / Bhutan .....</b>	<b>20</b>
Reporting period .....	20
Position on the World Watch List .....	20
Persecution engines .....	21

Drivers of persecution..... 22

The Persecution pattern..... 23

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life..... 24

Violence..... 31

5 Year trends ..... 33

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female ..... 34

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male ..... 35

Persecution of other religious minorities..... 36

Future outlook..... 36

External Links - Persecution Dynamics..... 37

**Further useful reports.....37**



(c) Alamy

# Introduction

## World Watch List 2023

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	94	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.7	92	91	92	92	91
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	88	87	85	86
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.2	89	88	88	87	86
5	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.1	16.3	9.1	88	91	92	90	87
6	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.6	14.8	14.4	16.7	88	87	85	80	80
7	Pakistan	13.4	13.8	14.8	14.8	12.9	16.7	86	87	88	88	87
8	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.8	15.8	16.5	10.7	86	85	86	85	85
9	Afghanistan	15.4	15.7	15.4	16.1	16.6	4.6	84	98	94	93	94
10	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	9.4	83	79	79	85	87
11	India	12.3	13.1	13.0	14.8	13.3	15.7	82	82	83	83	83
12	Syria	13.2	14.1	13.6	14.1	14.1	11.3	80	78	81	82	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.9	15.8	16.7	2.4	80	81	78	79	77
14	Myanmar	12.5	11.6	13.9	13.9	12.9	15.4	80	79	74	73	71
15	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.8	16.0	16.4	0.2	77	77	77	78	78
16	China	12.9	10.0	12.7	14.5	15.6	11.1	77	76	74	70	65
17	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	10.3	15.1	15.0	76	70	67	66	68
18	Iraq	14.1	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	4.6	76	78	82	76	79
19	Algeria	14.1	14.1	11.5	13.7	15.1	4.8	73	71	70	73	70
20	Mauritania	14.5	14.2	13.3	14.1	14.2	1.3	72	70	71	68	67
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	13.9	12.7	15.6	1.5	71	71	71	73	74
22	Colombia	11.8	8.9	13.1	11.3	10.4	15.4	71	68	67	62	58
23	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.5	9.6	13.8	15.6	71	68	67	66	48
24	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	68	66	68	70
25	Vietnam	11.8	9.6	12.8	14.6	14.4	6.9	70	71	72	72	70
26	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	14.1	15.7	0.6	70	69	70	70	69
27	Cuba	13.1	8.3	13.1	13.2	14.9	7.0	70	66	62	52	49
28	Niger	9.4	9.5	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.4	70	68	62	60	52
29	Morocco	13.2	13.8	10.9	12.2	14.5	4.8	69	69	67	66	63
30	Bangladesh	12.6	10.7	12.8	11.3	10.6	10.7	69	68	67	63	58
31	Laos	11.7	10.2	13.3	14.2	14.0	5.0	68	69	71	72	71
32	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.6	68	65	63	43	43
33	Indonesia	11.3	12.0	11.6	11.1	9.2	12.8	68	68	63	60	65
34	Qatar	14.2	14.1	10.5	13.2	14.4	1.5	68	74	67	66	62
35	Egypt	12.7	13.5	11.6	12.1	10.8	7.0	68	71	75	76	76
36	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.4	12.0	13.5	6.5	67	66	67	64	63
37	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.6	67	66	64	56	55
38	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	11.0	10.5	13.9	67	65	64	60	61
39	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.4	12.1	10.6	66	66	65	63	65
40	Bhutan	13.2	12.3	11.6	13.9	14.2	1.1	66	67	64	61	64
41	Turkey	12.8	11.5	11.8	13.0	11.5	5.7	66	65	69	63	66
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.5	66	63	62	57	56
43	Malaysia	12.8	14.3	11.4	12.2	11.1	3.9	66	63	63	62	60
44	Tajikistan	13.8	12.2	12.3	12.8	13.4	1.1	66	65	66	65	65
45	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.9	65	65	64	60	54
46	Brunei	14.8	14.6	10.1	10.9	14.4	0.4	65	64	64	63	63
47	Oman	14.0	14.1	10.3	13.3	12.9	0.6	65	66	63	62	59
48	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.6	11.9	12.7	14.2	1.1	65	64	64	64	63
49	Jordan	13.0	14.0	10.5	12.3	12.7	2.0	65	66	64	64	65
50	Nicaragua	10.8	5.9	11.9	12.8	13.6	9.4	65	56	51	41	41

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.3	64	63	62	61	61
52	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	64	63	62	60
53	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.6	63	61	58	55	52
54	UAE	13.4	13.4	9.9	11.2	12.8	1.1	62	62	62	60	58
55	Nepal	12.0	9.8	9.4	13.0	12.6	4.4	61	64	66	64	64
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	0.6	60	59	56	56	56
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.3	9.7	10.3	12.0	2.0	60	59	58	60	57
58	Azerbaijan	13.2	10.0	9.5	12.0	13.6	0.6	59	60	56	57	57
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.2	11.0	10.4	12.0	2.0	59	58	58	57	56
60	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	7.6	58	55	53	56	48
61	Russian Federation	12.3	7.9	10.3	11.8	12.8	2.0	57	56	57	60	60
62	Sri Lanka	12.8	9.1	10.6	11.3	9.5	3.9	57	63	62	65	58
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	8.9	57	50	42	42	41
64	Venezuela	6.0	4.6	11.7	10.2	11.4	11.7	56	51	39	42	41
65	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	11.1	55	52	48	48	43
66	Bahrain	12.7	13.3	8.7	10.7	8.8	0.9	55	57	56	55	55
67	Honduras	7.1	5.0	11.9	7.6	9.8	11.9	53	48	46	39	38
68	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	51	46	43	42
69	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	9.2	14.8	51	48	47	48	47
70	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	5.4	49	44	43	41	42
71	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	3.0	48	43	47	45	46
72	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.0	46	43	43	44	44
73	El Salvador	7.7	4.2	10.6	7.4	9.1	6.7	46	45	42	38	30
74	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	42	42	42	43
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	1.1	44	44	43	43	43
76	Belarus	9.5	3.8	4.8	9.4	12.1	3.3	43	33	30	28	35

## Copyright note

This document is the property of 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: © 2023 Open Doors International.

## 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 2023 reporting period was 1 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- 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).

# WWL 2023 Situation in brief / Bhutan

## Brief country details

Bhutan: Population (UN estimate for 2022)	Christians	Chr%
788,000	18,800	2.4

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

## Map of country



Bhutan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	66	40
WWL 2022	67	34
WWL 2021	64	43
WWL 2020	61	45
WWL 2019	64	33

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

*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 2023: Keys to understanding / Bhutan

## Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2021/22 country report – covering 154 countries, Bhutan not included	AI country report 2021/22	<a href="https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf">https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf</a>	
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	<a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12480707">https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12480707</a>	16 June 2022
Bertelsmann Transformation Index country report 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI report 2022	<a href="https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/BTN">https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/BTN</a>	16 June 2022
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	<a href="https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/bhutan/">https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/bhutan/</a>	16 June 2022
Crisis24 country report (Garda World) – covering 193 countries	Crisis24 country report	<a href="https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/bhutan">https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/bhutan</a>	16 June 2022
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2021 – covering 167 countries	EIU 2021 (p.40)	<a href="https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf">https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf</a>	16 June 2022
FFP's Fragile States Index 2022 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2022	<a href="https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/">https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/</a>	26 July 2022
Freedom House's 2022 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Bhutan not included	Democracy Index 2022	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores</a>	
Freedom House's 2022 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2022	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/bhutan/freedom-world/2022">https://freedomhouse.org/country/bhutan/freedom-world/2022</a>	16 June 2022
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2022 report – covering 70 countries, Bhutan not included	Freedom on the Net 2022	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores</a>	
Human Rights Watch World Report 2022 (country chapter) – covering 100+ countries, Bhutan not included	HRW 2022 country chapter	<a href="https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021">https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021</a>	
Internet World Stats 2022	IWS 2022	<a href="https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#bt">https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#bt</a>	16 June 2022
RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2022	<a href="https://rsf.org/en/bhutan">https://rsf.org/en/bhutan</a>	16 June 2022
Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2021	<a href="https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/btn">https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/btn</a>	16 June 2022
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators (country profile) – covering 189 countries	HDI profile	<a href="https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/BTN">https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/BTN</a>	16 June 2022
US State Department's 2021 International Religious Freedom (country profile)	IRFR 2021	<a href="https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bhutan/">https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bhutan/</a>	16 June 2022
USCIRF 2022 country reports – covering 15 CPC / 12 SWL, Bhutan is not included	USCIRF 2022	<a href="https://www.uscifr.gov/countries">https://www.uscifr.gov/countries</a>	
World Bank country overview – covering 178 countries	World Bank overview 2022	<a href="https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bhutan/overview#1">https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bhutan/overview#1</a>	16 June 2022
World Bank country profile data – covering 222 countries	World Bank profile (2020 data)	<a href="https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&amp;id=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=BTN">https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&amp;id=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=BTN</a>	16 June 2022
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 – covering 147 countries, Bhutan not included	Macro Poverty Outlook 2022	<a href="https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/macro-poverty-outlook/mpo_eap">https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/macro-poverty-outlook/mpo_eap</a>	

## 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 Lhentshog (Commission for Religious Organizations)" (Source: [A/HRC/42/8/Add.1](#), p.8). Although this was a welcome statement, Christians have still not been officially 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.

The arrival of COVID-19 dealt a severe blow to Bhutan's revenue-earning tourist industry. However, there have only been a total of 21 COVID-related deaths (ages not recorded) since the first cases of infection were reported in March 2020 ([Worldometer](#), accessed 19 January 2023).

## 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, although numbers are slowly decreasing). 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 13 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 crisis 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. The [popularity](#) of the government had 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.

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 Jieliubu 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. China and Bhutan announced the [resumption](#) of border talks (The Diplomat, 18 November 2021), but so far, no new developments have been reported. Bhutan finds itself in a catch-22 situation as engagement with and closer ties to China will leave its other big neighbor and traditional partner, India, [deeply worried](#) (RSIS, 28 September 2022). Apart from this challenge and maybe also as an answer to it, Bhutan also increased and deepened ties with many other countries, and "[internationalized](#)" (East Asia Forum, 26 November 2022).

### **Gender perspective**

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, 2022](#)). 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](#)). Bhutan has also committed to end child, forced, and early marriage by 2030 in accordance with [Target 5.3](#) of the Sustainable Development Goals ([Girls Not Brides, 2022](#)).

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 under-reporting of cases.

## Religious landscape

Bhutan: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	18,800	2.4
Muslim	2,000	0.3
Hindu	92,900	11.8
Buddhist	647,000	82.1
Ethno-religionist	27,100	3.4
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	100	0.0
Atheist	0	0.0
Agnostic	240	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 2022)

Most Christians come from a Nepalese background, many of whom are living in the south. According to WCD 2022 estimates, 82.1% 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, last accessed 19 January 2023), 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 2022), 90,000 refugees have already moved to third countries, particularly the USA, leaving 6500 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). As reported by the US State Department (IRFR 2021, page 5): "There were 139 religious organizations registered with the government as of December [2021]: 137 Buddhist and two Hindu. The CRO took no action on any pending church registration requests. The government did not offer any official explanation to applicants."

## Economic landscape

According to UNDP's HDI profile:

- **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 the World Bank country profile:

- Bhutan is classified as a lower middle income country, but is improving
- **GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international USD):** 10,551
- **GDP growth rate (2020):** -10.1%
- **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 to cope with (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 pro-

posal 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. Still, the country [re-opened for international tourists](#) from September 2021 onwards; however, the daily amount those tourists are obliged to spend increased from 70 to 200 USD (Channel News Asia, 30 June 2022), potentially limiting the number of tourist arrivals for the time-being.

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 2022:

- "In 2018, Bhutan's improved GNI qualified the country to graduate from its "least-developed country" (LDC) status according to UNCDP. The GNI threshold of three-year average for graduation is \$1,242 per person. Bhutan also improved its Human Asset Index, another indicator of vulnerability associated with LDC status, from 45 in 2000 to close to 73 in 2018, driven mainly by an increase in gross secondary education enrollment. Bhutan's graduation date from its LDC status has been postponed to 2023, however, following the government's request for more time to prepare for this transition. Upon graduation from the LDC, Bhutan will no longer qualify for development assistance meant only for LDCs."

According to the World Bank Country overview:

- "The country is known for its unique philosophy – Gross National Happiness (GNH) – which guides its development strategy. Abundant water resources in the valleys create ideal conditions to tap renewal energy sources with hydropower development which has spurred economic growth with quasi universal access to low-cost electricity. Fiscal revenues from selling surplus hydropower to India and tourism have helped the country invest substantially in human capital development. This has led to significant improvements in service delivery, education and health outcomes. Bhutan has a stable political and economic environment. It has made tremendous progress in reducing extreme poverty and promoting gender equality, with continuing efforts to address social inequality issues and regional disparities."

## COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis did not affect Bhutan greatly from a health perspective and it managed to [vaccinate](#) 93% of its adult population in a mere 16 days (Channel News Asia, 12 April 2021). Presumably in acknowledgement of this, Bhutan's minister of health, her Excellency Lyonpo Dechen Wangmo, was elected [President of the 74th World Health Assembly](#), an organ of the WHO (The Diplomat, 15 June 2021). Nevertheless, given the country's dependence on the tourist industry - an estimated 63% of households rely on tourism as their source of income – the eco-

conomic fallout from the COVID crisis was far greater than the effect on public health, since Bhutan was effectively closed to all travel for several months. According to estimations from an economic taskforce within the country, it may take [five years](#) for Bhutan to bring tourism back to pre-pandemic levels (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 affected them disproportionately.

### Gender perspective

Due to more limited employment and education opportunities, women and girls are amongst the most economically vulnerable. Whilst it scores well in several areas on [Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index \(2022\)](#), Bhutan scores poorly in relation to female financial inclusion. A 2021 COVID-19 impact study by the National Commission of Women and Children (NCWC) revealed that a higher proportion of the self-employed in Bhutan were women, while men preferred more secure/corporate jobs ([NCWC](#), 1 December 2021).

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the UNDP's HDI profile 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:** 43.7%
- **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:** 24.9% of the population are below the age of 14, 6.3% are above the age of 65
- **Education:** The primary school enrollment rate is 106%
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 4.3%; 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 profile):

- **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 ([UNDP, 2020, p.363](#)).
- **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, 35% of the population are today of Nepalese ethnicity (mainly the Lhotshampas). 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 during 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 was 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 12 July 2022). 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).

According to a phone survey quoted in the World Bank's [Bhutan Development Update \(April 2022\)](#), 29% of all households were worried about running out of food. According to the report, the public social security net in Bhutan had reduced its levels of support: In September 2020, 20% of households received financial support; in April 2021, this had gone down to 17% of households. 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 2022):

- **Internet usage:** 74.3% penetration – survey date: January 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 74.3% penetration – survey date: January 2022  
According to [Napoleon Cat](#), in December 2022, 52.1% of Facebook users were male and 47.9% female.

According to the World Bank country profile:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 97 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 788,000 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). In the WWL 2023 reporting period, China has [accelerated](#) the settlement-construction process along its border with Bhutan which began in 2020 (Jamestown Foundation, 11 February 2022). Satellite pictures show that the project includes over 200 structures, with several two-story buildings in [six locations](#) (Times of India, 13 January 2022).

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 specific 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) has not translated into less pressure for Christians on the ground.

### 2) The balancing act between India and China is becoming 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. The Chinese inroads became very visible in 2021, when it became evident that China had built a whole village and infrastructure on [Bhutanese territory](#) (Foreign Policy, 7 May 2021) and expanded structures along the border in the WWL 2023 reporting period. 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. It remains to be seen if Bhutan can continue its [balancing act](#) and avoid becoming a pawn in the struggle between the country's two giant neighbors (Jamestown Foundation, 17 December 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. Therefore, there are calls to move into the future and not be lulled into a false sense of comfort by the "phenomenal achievements of our [forefathers](#)" (Bhutan Times, 20 June 2022). 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.

In the near future, however, 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 in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, might cause a renewed emphasis on religion, meaning Buddhism.

## External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: A/HRC/42/8/Add.1 - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/session42/Pages/ListReports.aspx>
- Recent history: Worldometer - <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/bhutan/>
- Political and legal landscape: Constitution - <https://www.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Constitution-of-Bhutan-Eng-2008.pdf?x50504>
- Political and legal landscape: trekked the country - <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/bhutan-king-treks-mountains-covid-19-measures-15090548>
- Political and legal landscape: popularity - <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/2569>
- Political and legal landscape: assertiveness - <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/is-india-losing-its-grip-on-bhutan/>
- Political and legal landscape: Bhutanese state territory - <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/whats-behind-chinas-expansion-of-its-territorial-dispute-with-bhutan/>
- Political and legal landscape: Bhutanese territory - <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/07/china-bhutan-border-villages-security-forces/>
- Political and legal landscape: resumption - <https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/bhutan-china-border-negotiations-in-context/>
- Political and legal landscape: deeply worried - <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip22054-china-bhutan-engagement-worries-for-india/>
- Political and legal landscape: internationalized - <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/11/26/bhutans-foreign-policy-balancing-act/>
- Political and legal landscape: female line - [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/BTN/INT\\_CEDAW\\_NGO\\_BTN\\_44\\_8208\\_E.pdf](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/BTN/INT_CEDAW_NGO_BTN_44_8208_E.pdf)
- Political and legal landscape: Girls Not Brides, 2022 - <https://atlas.girlsnotbrides.org/map/bhutan>
- Political and legal landscape: CEDAW, 2016 - [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=CEDAW/C/BTN/CO/8-9&Lang=En](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=CEDAW/C/BTN/CO/8-9&Lang=En)
- Political and legal landscape: UNICEF, 2016 - [https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/4251/file/Child%20Marriage%20Evidence%20Review\\_Web.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/4251/file/Child%20Marriage%20Evidence%20Review_Web.pdf)
- Political and legal landscape: WHO, 2013 - <https://www.mindbank.info/item/4434>
- Political and legal landscape: Target 5.3 - <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>
- Political and legal landscape: Girls Not Brides, 2022 - <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and->

countries/bhutan/#:~:text=Bhutan%20has%20committed%20to%20eliminate,of%20the%20Sustainable%20Development%20Goals.

- Political and legal landscape: OECD 2019, - <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/BT.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: CEDAW committee (2016) - [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/BTN/CO/8-9&Lang=En](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/BTN/CO/8-9&Lang=En)
- Religious landscape description: Vajrayana Buddhism - <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vajrayana>
- Religious landscape description: Constitution - <https://www.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Constitution-of-Bhutan-Eng-2008.pdf?x50504>
- Religious landscape description: refugees - <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/2497>
- 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>
- Economic landscape: environment - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/bhutan-compromise-forests-pay-national-debt-181107125123352.html>
- Economic landscape: comment - <https://kuenselonline.com/no-we-dont-need-more-bars/>
- Economic landscape: re-opened for international tourists - <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/bhutan-reopens-tourists-september-covid-19-restrictions-eased-2783511>
- Economic landscape: presented - <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/2500>
- Economic landscape: implement projects - <https://www.adb.org/publications/bhutan-development-effectiveness-brief-2020>
- Economic landscape: vaccinate - <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/bhutan-covid-19-vaccine-drive-quick-population-14606720>
- Economic landscape: President of the 74th World Health Assembly - <https://thedi diplomat.com/2021/06/bhutans-health-minister-on-navigating-the-pandemic-as-a-small-state/>
- Economic landscape: five years - <https://www.southasiamonitor.org/bhutan/bhutan-five-years-bring-tourism-pre-covid-level>
- Economic landscape: Georgetown’s Women, Peace and Security Index (2022) - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/bhutan/>
- Economic landscape: NCWC, 1 December 2021 - <https://www.ncwc.gov.bt/publications/COVID19-Impact%20of-Women-and-Children-Study1646648937.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNDP, 2020, p.363 - <https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents//hdr2020pdf.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: 35 million USD Development Policy Credit - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/06/23/world-bank-helps-bhutan-alleviate-impacts-of-covid-19-and-achieve-economic-resilience-and-environment-sustainability>
- Social and cultural landscape: migrant workers - <http://www.kuenselonline.com/53000-foreign-workers-in-the-country/>
- Social and cultural landscape: Gross National Happiness Index - <https://ophi.org.uk/policy/gross-national-happiness-index/>
- Social and cultural landscape: stigmatized - <https://thedi diplomat.com/2018/11/bhutan-the-mental-state-of-the-happy-kingdom/>
- Social and cultural landscape: increasing number of drug addicts - <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/26/addicted-in-bhutan/>
- Social and cultural landscape: decriminalize - <https://www.reuters.com/article/bhutan-bill-lgbt/bhutan-parliament-decriminalizes-homosexuality-to-delight-of-activists-idUSKBN28K1SK>
- Social and cultural landscape: Bhutan Development Update (April 2022) - <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/4bbceadb1eca8d10b57cf12241506250-0310062022/original/Bhutan-Development-Update-April-2022.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: Priyadarshini V. Women in Bhutan, Indian History Congress 2014 - <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44158477?seq=1>

- Social and cultural landscape: Catalyst, 15 April 2019 - <https://catalyst.cm/stories-new/2019/4/15/in-bhutan-a-history-of-matriarchy-and-the-question-of-true-equality>
- Social and cultural landscape: CEDAW Committee (2016) - [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/BTN/CO/8-9&Lang=En](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/BTN/CO/8-9&Lang=En)
- Social and cultural landscape: South Asia Monitor, 11 May 2020 - <https://www.southasiamonitor.org/bhutan/domestic-violence-rise-bhutan>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Bank blog, 2 December 2020 - <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/some-women-bhutan-home-not-safe-place>
- Technological landscape: Napoleon Cat - <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-bhutan/2022/12/>
- Technological landscape: the whole country - <http://www.bbs.bt/news/?p=96529>
- Technological landscape: modernization - <https://www.businessinsider.sg/bhutan-happiness-technology-2018-8/>
- Security situation: help - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/06/china-india-bhutan-standoff-disputed-territory>
- Security situation: avoided offending China - <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/bhutan-and-china-sign-mou-for-3-step-roadmap-to-expedite-boundary-talks/article36999596.ece>
- Security situation: accelerated - <https://jamestown.org/program/what-is-at-stake-in-china-bhutan-boundary-negotiations/>
- Security situation: six locations - <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/china-steps-up-construction-on-bhutan-border-show-sat-data/articleshow/88863733.cms>
- Trends analysis: Bhutanese territory - <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/07/china-bhutan-border-villages-security-forces/>
- Trends analysis: balancing act - <https://jamestown.org/program/foreseeing-the-china-india-boundary-dispute-2022-and-beyond/>
- Trends analysis: forefathers - <https://bhutantimes.bt/index.php/2022/06/20/bhutan-moves-into-the-future/>

## WWL 2023: 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 (Web archive, accessed 19 January 2023). Sources name 1965 as the date when church activity became visible and started to grow.

### Church spectrum today

No details are available for publication.

### 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.

## 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](https://web.archive.org/web/20070823171120/http://www.nieparo.edu.bt/WebPages/Publications/The_Call/4_How_It_All_Began.pdf)
- 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>

# WWL 2023: Persecution Dynamics / Bhutan

## Reporting period

1 October 2021 - 30 September 2022

## Position on the World Watch List

Bhutan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	66	40
WWL 2022	67	34
WWL 2021	64	43
WWL 2020	61	45
WWL 2019	64	33

*Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods*

In general, the persecution situation in Bhutan has not changed very much in the WWL 2023 period; the actual decrease in score was only 0.4 points. Fewer incidents of violence were reported, but this may also be due to the fact that Bhutan was virtually closed for travelling for at least part of the reporting period. Pressure increased the most in the *Church sphere of life*, as meetings of Christians remained difficult. Pressure was on a level more or less comparable to WWL 2022 in all other *spheres of life*, reflecting in particular the continued difficulties faced by Christian converts from Buddhism or ethnic-animist religion. Converts are not recognized in society and are therefore often shunned by fellow citizens and denied official documents by the authorities. Children of Christians also often experience discrimination at school.

## 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 and even stronger 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 are deeply involved in every day life, leaving Christians little chance of opting out. 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, such as a non-objection certificate. 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. Also, Christians have to be very cautious when gathering to avoid any neighbors complaining or taking action against them.

#### Drivers of Clan oppression

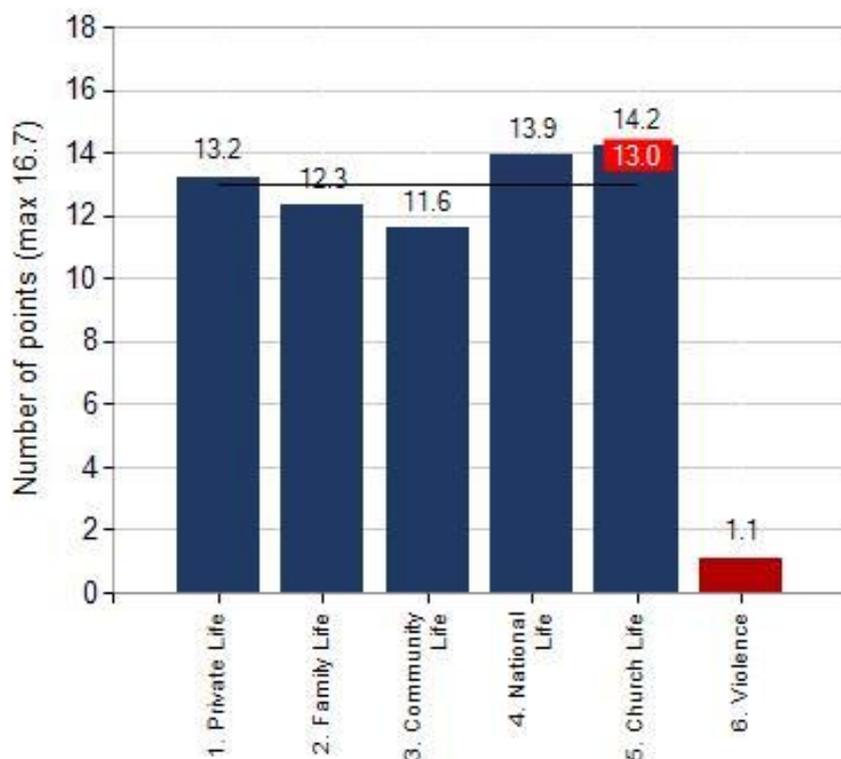
- **Extended family (Very strong):** The merging of ethnic beliefs with Buddhism causes additional possibilities for persecution; Christians refusing to follow both Buddhist beliefs and ethnic traditional rites are more likely to get into difficulties. This is especially true for converts' families, 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.

### The Persecution pattern

The WWL 2023 Persecution pattern for Bhutan shows (see chart below):

- The average pressure on Christians in Bhutan is very high at a level of 13.0 points, as was the case 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 categories of Christian communities face pressure in the *National and Church spheres*. This pressure is fueled by the Christian minority continuing to be side-lined in everyday life and lacking official recognition.
- The score for violence against Christians decreased to 1.1 points in WWL 2023. While violence is at a very low level compared to many other countries on the WWL, this decrease led to a small drop in the overall score.

## WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern for Bhutan



### 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 2023 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://opendoorsanalytical.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 1.8: 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 monitoring or even 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 discrete way." Another expert added: "They always disguise it as a non-Christian activity." If they did make their presence too obvious, it could lead to the owner of the rented house terminating their rent-contract.

**Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (3.25 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. As a country expert explains: "Since Christianity is not recognized, publicly declaring their faith is problematic. However, increasingly, Christians are seen speaking openly about their faith on social media. But since there is a fear of discrimination, a lot of Christians practice self-censorship. And while the Internet gives at least the illusion of the possibility of camouflage, wearing Christian symbols directly exposes Christians." Consequently, rarely do they display Christian symbols in their houses or wear them, as it increases the risk of identifying, profiling and monitoring them.

## 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. 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, 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 and the teacher is a Lama. 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 of.

**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. Often Christians give their children Buddhist names to spare them discrimination and additional scrutiny. 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.

**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. In one example in the WWL 2023 reporting period, a convert and his wife were not only expelled by their family, the latter also performed a funeral service, declaring their son to be dead.*

*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 people converting to Christianity, Christians active in ministry are being particularly closely monitored, which may even mean that their phone and social media use is kept under observation. There are many incidents of Christian activity being reported to the authorities by the local community. There were incidents reported 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 or are scheduled to perform non-Christian rites by their superiors on purpose. If they decline, this gives an opportunity to dismiss them. 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, interroga-

tions 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." 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 (A) 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. Additionally, all organizations, especially those active in social services and community support, could be perceived as being in competition with the royal household.

**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**

*The main task of Christianity - as widely believed in society and portrayed by the media - is to convert "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.*

*Travelling in the country has also become more difficult as it has become mandatory for trips to rural areas to obtain prior permission from the local authorities and inform them about one's whereabouts. At the same time, the government has set up an online "[Checkpost Management System](#)" (CPMS), which obliges travelers to supply detailed information (Bhutan government website, accessed 19 January 2023).*

## Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

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

Christian house-churches are always 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 and have their applications pending for many years. As mentioned above (in: *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 for private use only in small quantities. Likewise, they cannot be openly sold or distributed.

**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. Speaking up against persecution can also easily be perceived as speaking up against the king and his family, which is unheard of and unthinkable.

**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 be perceived as competition and Christian volunteers can even be targeted. A country expert illustrates the prevailing mindset: "When you go and try to help the hurting, sick and old people, you will be questioned from which Department you are coming."*

## 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.

<b>Bhutan: Violence Block question</b>	<b>WWL 2023</b>	<b>WWL 2022</b>
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	x
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	x	x
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)?	0	x
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?	x	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 2023 reporting period. It should be kept in mind that receiving reports from Bhutan is challenging.

## 5 Year trends

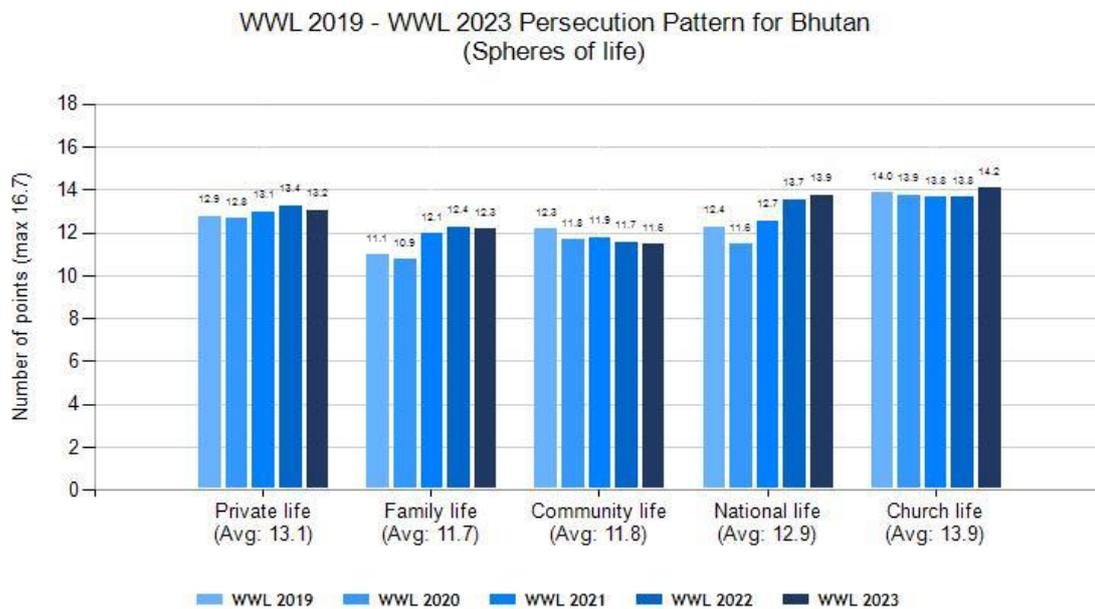
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

### 5 Year trends: Average pressure

Bhutan: WWL 2019 - WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern history	
	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2023	13.0
2022	13.0
2021	12.7
2020	12.2
2019	12.5

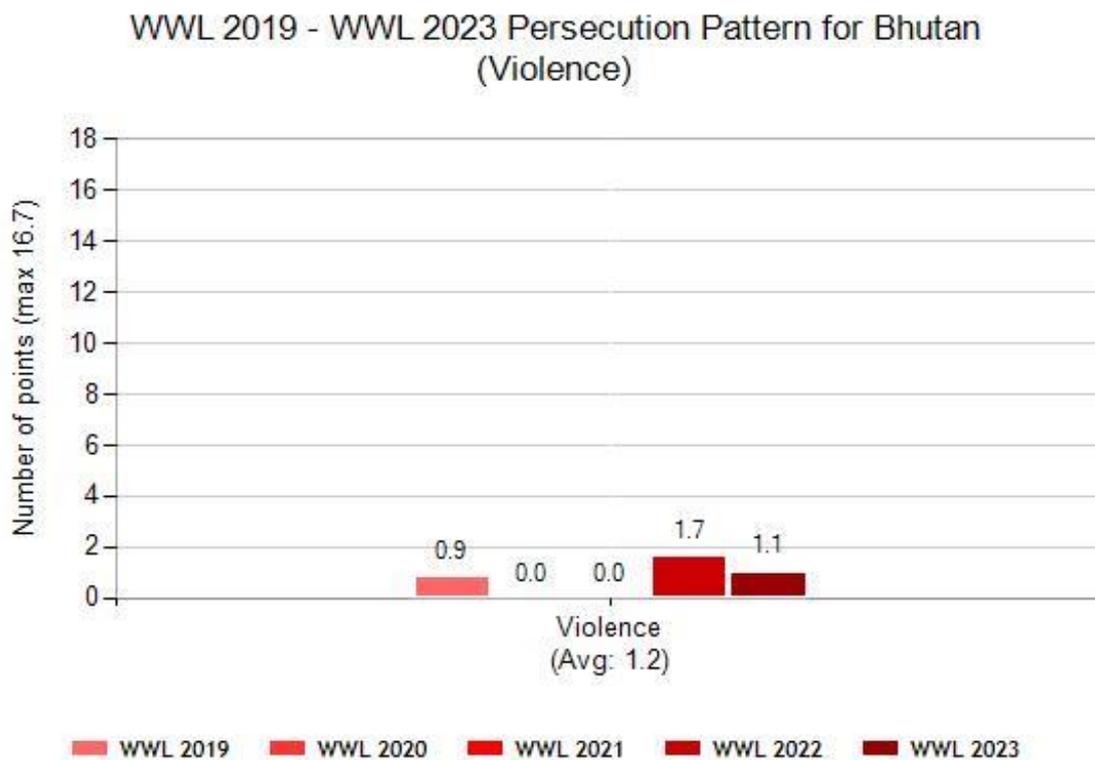
Since WWL 2019, the average pressure has been consistent above 12.2 points. It now appears to be levelling off at the 13.0 point mark.

### 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 *National sphere* reached new heights of pressure in WWL 2023, reflecting the fact that travelling has become more restricted.

## 5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



Persecution has never been very violent in Bhutan and the score has usually been at a very low level. At the same time, the low scoring 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; Imprisonment by government
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 2023 reporting period, this remains an ongoing risk for converts. A country expert shares that, due to polygamous practices, “the unbelieving spouse will just marry another person,” exacerbating the fear that female converts may be left or sidelined by their husbands. 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. For single converts, the fear of being pressured into marriage is based on tangible threats, although no such instances have been reported in the WWL 2023 reporting period.

### Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Denied inheritance or possessions; Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Political and Legal	-
Security	-
Social and Cultural	-
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 2021):

- "Members of the Hindu Dharmic Samudaya, one of eight religious organizations on the [Commission for Religious Organizations'] board, continued to cite strong official support for Hindu religious practice." (page 1)
- "The government continued its financial assistance for the construction of Buddhist temples and shrines as well as funding for Buddhist monks and monasteries. According to the NGO Minority Rights Group International, authorities gave Buddhist temples priority over Hindu temples in the licensing process." (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, but not just by Bhutan alone (World Atlas, last accessed 19 January 2023). A 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). 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 an intended 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 analysis #3*). This would mean an even more difficult situation for the Christian minority and especially for converts.

## External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere: stated - <https://kuenselonline.com/choosing-our-own-faith/>
- Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere: Checkpost Management System - <http://www.sarpang.gov.bt/announcements/checkpost-management-systemcpms>
- 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>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: victims of severe discrimination - <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/who-are-the-lhotshampa-people.html>

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the new Research & Reports page of the website od.org. As in earlier years, they are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) using the following links:

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