

World Watch Research

# Bhutan: Background Information

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World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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## Map of country



Bhutan: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
792,000	18,800	2.4

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

## 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.

As Bhutan's economy is largely depending on tourism, COVID-19 came as a huge challenge not just under the health aspect. However, despite facing economic challenges, the country has recovered remarkably well. Elections took place in January 2024 without incident (see below: *Political landscape*).

## 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 (Seattle Times, 15 October 2016). 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 16 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 still 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. 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.

On 9 January 2024, parliamentary elections saw another two party parliament and the return of Prime Minister [Tshering Tobgay](#), who had already governed the country from 2013 to 2018 (Asia Society, 29 January 2024). However, in general, Bhutan is busier watching foreign relations than dealing with

internal politics, despite all its challenges. 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 in 2021 (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). Thus, although observers say that Bhutan's foreign policy is guided by its own set of philosophical and cultural [values](#) which other countries can learn from (South Asia Monitor, 25 May 2023), negotiations remain a [balancing act](#) between its two major neighbors (India Times, 14 January 2023). However, as a small country, Bhutan can ill-afford not to negotiate and some observers have even seen a "[tilt towards China](#)" (South China Morning Post, 29 October 2023). Despite all talks, China's claims on Bhutanese territory have increased over the years and it has altered the [status quo](#) in the border region (Jamestown Foundation, 2 February 2024).

Calls for a release of all [political prisoners](#) in Bhutan, some of whom have been imprisoned for decades, increased in 2023 (HRW, 13 March 2023), but it remains to be seen how the government reacts.

### **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 for Bhutan, 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 Bhutan](#), accessed 20 August 2024). 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 (UN, 2023).

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. Although 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	1,900	0.2
Hindu	90,800	11.5
Buddhist	655,000	82.7
Ethnic religionist	25,800	3.3
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	110	0.0
Atheist	0	0.0
Agnostic	230	0.0
Other	0	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

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

Most Christians come from a Nepalese background, many of whom are living in the south. According to WCD 2024 estimates, 82.7% of the population practice different forms of Buddhism. The rest of the 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 3 September 2024), 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). There had been efforts to make repatriation agreements, but in the meantime the situation has changed. According to a report by the [Kathmandu Post \(6 March 2022\)](#), a total of 113,500 individuals have since been resettled in the USA, Canada and other countries under the third country settlement program. The report states: "According to the District Administration Office, Jhapa, where the remaining Bhutanese refugees are currently living, the number of Bhutanese refugees stands at a little over 6,000. Most of them have obtained refugee cards after the third country settlement program was stopped in 2016-2017." 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).

The US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Bhutan](#)) reported: "At the end of 2022, the most recent year government information was available, there were 139 registered religious groups, of which 137 were Hindu and two were Buddhist. The CRO again took no action on any pending Christian church registration requests and again did not offer any official explanation to applicants."

## Economic landscape

According to [UNDP Human Development Report Bhutan](#) (updates as of 13 March 2024) and [World Bank data](#) (accessed 21 August 2024):

- **GDP per capita (current US\$):** 2.9 billion (2022)
- **GDP growth (annual %):** 5.2 (2022)
- **Inflation, consumer prices (annual %):** 4.2 (2023)
- **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. (2022)
- **Personal remittances, received (% of GDP):** 3.3 (2022)

### The only "carbon-negative" country in the world

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). While commending Bhutan for its achievements and policy and praising the country to be the first carbon-negative in the world, a February 2024 [World Bank report](#) highlighted the pressure on the resources and challenges of



exporting electricity through water power (World Bank, Bhutan Country Environmental Analysis: Taking the green growth agenda forward, February 2024).

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. In an effort to boost tourist numbers, Bhutan announced a [change](#) to its sustainable development fee (SDF) program: while the increase in fees from 65 USD a day to 200 USD a day from September 2022 remains effective, from June 2023 the permitted stay will be extended. Paying four days SDF earns another stay of four days, and paying 12 days earns the permission to stay a whole month. All these policies are applicable to tourists paying in USD only (Asia News, 20 June 2023). 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, what makes the balancing act between India and China all the more delicate. While tourism is a way of "rubbing shoulders" with foreign cultures and of opening up, its importance is much more an economic factor: As stated above, 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. In an effort to diversify trade and reduce its dependency on India, Bhutan and Bangladesh signed a [transit agreement](#) according to which Bhutan is allowed to use three ports in Bangladesh for its trade (Reuters, 23 March 2023). Remittances make up an even larger part of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) than tourism, but the [numbers declined](#) in 2022 to 82.6 million USD, despite the fact that the number of emigrants is growing (Kuensel, 7 October 2023).

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 Bhutan Report 2024](#):

- "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 [World Bank's Bhutan overview](#) (last updated 3 October 2023):

- "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 renewable 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 made tremendous progress in reducing extreme poverty and promoting gender equality, with continuing efforts to address social inequality issues and regional disparities."
- "The economy has been significantly affected by the series of external shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and the global ramifications of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Pandemic-related relief measures and weak public revenue performance have resulted in high fiscal deficits and public debt. Financial sector vulnerabilities remain substantial due to high non-performing loans. The state holding company—Druk Holding and Investments —invested in crypto-mining operations to accelerate digital transformation towards diversifying the economy, which resulted in a significant decline of international reserves and a widening of the current account deficit (CAD) due to imports of information technology (IT) equipment."

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 economic 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.

As the Asia Society report summed up ([Asia Society Policy Institute, 29 January 2024](#)):

- "On the economic front, Bhutan is grappling with a meltdown, characterized by a dismal average growth rate of 1.7% over the past five years — the lowest in recent history. The private sector, a crucial pillar of the economy, is experiencing stagnation, with businesses operating at reduced capacity or shutting down. There has also been a concerning surge in poverty within the country."

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 ([GIWPS Bhutan profile](#), accessed 21 August 2024), 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 [UNDP Human Development Report Bhutan](#) (updates as of 13 March 2024) and [World Factbook Bhutan](#), accessed 21 August 2024:

- **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:** 44.4%
- **Literacy rate:** 70.9% (of population 15 years and older)
- **Mean years of schooling:** 5.8 years
- **Health and education indicators:** In Bhutan, 5 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](#) (accessed 21 August 2024):

- **Population age:** 22.1% of the population are below the age of 14, 6.4% are above the age of 65
- **Education:** The primary school completion rate is 79%, the enrollment rate is 104%
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 6.1%; the rate of vulnerable employment is 70.6% (modeled ILO estimate)
- **IDPs/Refugees:** Bhutan has an observer status in the UN's IOM, there is no data available.

According to [UNDP Human Development Report Bhutan](#) (updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a score of 0.681, Bhutan ranks 125th out of 193 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:** 72.2 years
- **Median age:** 30.7 years
- **GINI coefficient:** 37.4
- **Gender inequality:** With a score of 0.334, Bhutan scores 80th in a list of 166 countries on the Gender Inequality Index. The mean years of schooling for boys is 5.8, compared to 4.5 for girls. Also indicating a gender gap, the labor force participation rate is 51.6% for women, compared to 67.4% for men ([UNDP, 2021, p.293](#)).
- **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 [World Factbook Bhutan](#), 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 comparatively low. The government is struggling to offer the younger generation good career pro-

spects, 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, making it one of the reasons why Bhutan is trying to open up new trade routes (see above: Economic landscape).

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).

Consequently, the Asia Society report ([Asia Society Policy Institute, 29 January 2024](#)) mentions unemployment and youth unemployment prominently among the challenges the new government is facing:

- "Despite Bhutan's commendable progress in health, education, and infrastructure during its 15-year democratic journey, there is a pressing concern about the translation of these efforts into tangible economic advancements and the effective resolution of youth unemployment. The 2019 United Nations Development Programme report recognizes Bhutan's achievements in human development, but economic challenges persist. The focal points of the 2024 elections underscore the critical issues of youth unemployment, economic growth, a shrinking private sector, poverty, migration, brain drain, and a declining fertility rate. Notably, Bhutan's youth unemployment surged from 20.9% in 2021 to 28.9% in 2022. Both the PDP and the BTP have presented similar manifestos, pledging to address these concerns, particularly the alarming trend of skilled professionals migrating abroad. In the past year alone, almost 15,000 Bhutanese individuals, including professionals and skilled individuals, left the country, placing a strain on public service delivery in essential institutions such as hospitals and schools."

The World Bank published a detailed "[Labor Market Assessment report](#)" in February 2024 and highlighted (besides the special struggles women and youth are facing) a notable emphasis on the public sector in Bhutan and recommended a strengthening of the private sector (World Bank, 9 February 2024). Another significant point was mentioned in an article highlighting the report: "In addition, the average number of migrating Bhutanese workers has increased to more than 5,000 a month in early 2023, compared with less than 500, on average, one month before the pandemic" ([World Bank, Feature Story, 12 March 2024](#)).

Bhutan is famous for its [Gross National Happiness Index](#) (UN DESA, accessed 20 July 2023). 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).

Social assistance comes mainly from the (wider) family or from royal donations. This means that emergency help and support (e.g. in the case of unemployment) 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.

### Gender perspective

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](#)). Although 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 ([Tshehen et al., 13 March 2023](#); [World Bank blog, 2 December 2020](#)).

### Technological landscape

According to [Datareportal Digital 2024: Bhutan](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 86.8% penetration (686,000 Internet users)
- **Social media usage:** 57.9% of the total population. According to [Napoleon Cat](#), in July 2024, 52.2% of Facebook users were male and 47.8% female.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 99.1% of the total population

According to a report by [The Bhutanese on 30 September 2023](#), Bhutan's government has been working to establish a so-called 'Third International Internet Gateway' in collaboration with Bangladesh and India: "Currently, Bhutan relies on a congested corridor in Siliguri, India, for its international Internet connectivity. The vulnerability of this single point of access has been a cause for concern, as any disruption in this region could sever Bhutan's connection to the global digital landscape. With the establishment of the Third International Internet Gateway through Bangladesh, Bhutan will get a chance to enjoy redundant international Internet connectivity, safeguarding the country against potential disruptions and ensuring continuous access to the worldwide web."

The widespread use of smartphones means that most Bhutanese have access to the Internet, especially those living in or near the capital. Christians benefit from the increasing connections to the outside world, too. However, 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).

### 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 entered into official boundary talks (The Hindu, 14 October 2021). In 2021 and beyond, 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).

China and India [clashed violently](#) again in the Tawang region in December 2022 showing the volatility of the situation and that Bhutan needs to stay alert (USIP, 20 December 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.

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

## Christian origins

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

## Church spectrum today

No details can be made available for publication.

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

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

## External Links

- Recent history: A/HRC/42/8/Add.1 - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/session42/Pages/ListReports.aspx>
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