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## Bhutan: Full Country Dossier

January 2024



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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## Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
World Watch List 2024.....	3
Copyright note.....	4
Sources and definitions.....	4
<b>WWL 2024 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
Specific examples of positive developments.....	6
External Links - Situation in brief .....	6
<b>WWL 2024: 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 .....	16

Trends analysis .....	16
External Links - Keys to understanding .....	17
<b>WWL 2024: Church information / Bhutan .....</b>	<b>20</b>
Christian origins.....	20
Church spectrum today .....	20
Areas where Christians face most difficulties .....	20
Christian communities and how they are affected .....	20
External Links - Church information.....	21
<b>WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Bhutan .....</b>	<b>21</b>
Reporting period .....	21
Position on the World Watch List .....	21
Persecution engines .....	22
Drivers of persecution .....	23
The Persecution pattern.....	24
Pressure in the 5 spheres of life .....	25
Violence.....	31
5 Year trends .....	32
Gender-specific religious persecution / Female .....	33
Gender-specific religious persecution / Male .....	34
Persecution of other religious minorities.....	35
Future outlook.....	35
External Links - Persecution Dynamics.....	36
<b>Further useful reports.....</b>	<b>36</b>

# Introduction

## World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	11	-	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

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## Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- 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 can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

# WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Bhutan

## Brief country details

Bhutan: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
796,000	19,500	2.4

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

## Map of country



Bhutan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	68	36
WWL 2023	66	40
WWL 2022	67	34
WWL 2021	64	43
WWL 2020	61	45

## 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 examples are published here.

### Specific examples of positive developments

None

### 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 2024: Keys to understanding / Bhutan

## Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
BBC News Bhutan profile - updated 21 March 2023	BBC Bhutan profile	<a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12480707">https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12480707</a>	25 July 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index Bhutan report 2022	BTI Bhutan Report 2022	<a href="https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/BTN">https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/BTN</a>	25 July 2023
Crisis24 Bhutan report (Garda World)	Crisis24 Bhutan report	<a href="https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/bhutan">https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/bhutan</a>	25 July 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit Bhutan profile 2023	EIU Bhutan profile 2023	<a href="https://country.eiu.com/bhutan">https://country.eiu.com/bhutan</a>	25 July 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 Bhutan	<a href="https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/">https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/</a>	25 July 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Bhutan not included	Democracy Index 2023	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores</a>	
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 Bhutan	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/bhutan/freedom-world/2023">https://freedomhouse.org/country/bhutan/freedom-world/2023</a>	25 July 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries, Bhutan not included	Freedom on the Net 2023	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores</a>	
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 Bhutan profile	<a href="https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/bhutan/">https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/bhutan/</a>	4 July 2023
Girls Not Brides Bhutan report	Girls Not Brides Bhutan	<a href="https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/bhutan/">https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/bhutan/</a>	4 July 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 (country chapter) – covering 100+ countries, Bhutan not included	HRW 2023 country chapter	<a href="https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023">https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023</a>	
Internet World Stats 2023 Bhutan	IWS 2023 Bhutan	<a href="https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#bt">https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#bt</a>	25 July 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 Bhutan	<a href="https://rsf.org/en/bhutan">https://rsf.org/en/bhutan</a>	25 July 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2022 Bhutan	<a href="https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/btn">https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/btn</a>	25 July 2023
UNDP Human Development Report Bhutan - data updates as of 8 September 2022	UNDP HDR Bhutan	<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>	25 July 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Bhutan	IRFR 2022 Bhutan	<a href="https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bhutan/">https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bhutan/</a>	25 July 2023
USCIRF 2023 country reports – covering 17 CPC / 11 SWL, Bhutan is not included	USCIRF 2023	<a href="https://www.uscifr.gov/countries">https://www.uscifr.gov/countries</a>	
World Bank Bhutan data – 2021	World Bank Bhutan 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>	25 July 2023
World Bank Bhutan overview – updated 9 April 2023	World Bank Bhutan overview	<a href="https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bhutan/overview">https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bhutan/overview</a>	25 July 2023
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook Bhutan - April 2023	Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 Bhutan	<a href="https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/5d1783db09a0e09d15bbcea8ef0cec0b-0500052021/related/mpo-btn.pdf">https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/5d1783db09a0e09d15bbcea8ef0cec0b-0500052021/related/mpo-btn.pdf</a>	25 July 2023
World Factbook Bhutan - updated 18 July 2023	World Factbook Bhutan	<a href="https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/bhutan/">https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/bhutan/</a>	25 July 2023

## 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 largely depends on tourism, COVID-19 came as a huge challenge not just under the health aspect. However, in the WWL 2024 reporting period, Bhutan seemed to recover well and is trying to reach pre-pandemic tourist numbers again (see below: *Economic*



*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 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. 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 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).

Calls for a release of all [political prisoners](#) in Bhutan, some of whom have been imprisoned for decades, grew during the WWL 2024 reporting period (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 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 Bhutan). 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. 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	19,500	2.4
Muslim	2,200	0.3
Hindu	95,300	12.0
Buddhist	650,000	81.7
Ethno-religionist	28,100	3.5
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	100	0.0
Atheist	0	0.0
Agnostic	260	0.0
Other	0	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Most Christians come from a Nepalese background, many of whom are living in the south. According to WCD 2023 estimates, 81.7% 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). 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 Bhutan Report 2022), 90,000 refugees have already moved to third countries, particularly the USA, leaving 6500 refugees in Nepal at the beginning of 2021 (World Factbook Bhutan). 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 reported (IRFR 2022 Bhutan, page 3): "At the end of 2022, there were 139 religious organizations registered with the government: 137 Buddhist and two Hindu. The CRO took no action on any pending Christian church registration requests. The government did not offer any official explanation to applicants."

## Economic landscape

According to UNDP HDR Bhutan:

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

According to World Bank Bhutan data:

- Bhutan is classified as a lower middle income country, but is improving
- **GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international USD):** 10,908
- **GDP growth rate:** 3.4% (2021), -10.6% in 2020
- **Poverty gap at 6.85 USD a day (2017 PPP):** 12.6% (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. 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. 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 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 World Bank's Bhutan 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 made tremendous progress in reducing extreme poverty and promoting gender equality, with continuing efforts to address social inequality issues and regional disparities."

- "The COVID-19 pandemic and spillovers from the war in Ukraine have resulted in a significant deterioration in the macroeconomic situation. After the economy contracted for two consecutive years in FY19/20 and FY20/21, non-hydro industry and services sector activity have picked up. Tourism has been slow to recover, in part due to the new tourism levy act which tripled the sustainable development fee for international tourists from US\$65 to US\$200 per night. The youth unemployment rate increased from 20.9 percent in 2021 to 29 percent in 2022, which contributed to an increase in outward migration".

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.

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 2021/2022 (GIWPS 2021 Bhutan profile), 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 HDR Bhutan and World Factbook Butan:

- **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:** 4.1 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 Bhutan data:

- **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 90%, the enrollment rate is 106%
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 3.6%; the rate of vulnerable employment is 72.9% (modeled ILO estimate)
- **IDPs/Refugees:** Bhutan has an observer status in the UN's IOM, there is no data available.

According to the UNDP HDR Bhutan:

- **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 0.415, Bhutan scores 127th in a list of 162 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 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, 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).

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).

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. The [Development Update](#) from October 2022 mentions the survey as well, and adds: "Encouragingly, coverage increased for groups that were more adversely affected by the pandemic, including service sector workers and workers who lost jobs. Temporary income support from the DGRK (the Royal Relief Fund, the author) remained by far the most dominant form of assistance (78 percent)". (Page 16)

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

## Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2023 Bhutan):

- **Internet usage:** 74.3% penetration – survey date: July 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 73.8% penetration – survey date: July 2022. According to [Napoleon Cat](#), in May 2023, 51.6% of Facebook users were male and 48.4% female.

According to World Bank Bhutan data:

- **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 796,000 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 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).

That China and India again [clashed violently](#) in the Tawang region in December 2022 shows 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 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 phase of economic recovery which 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. Time will tell if the alleged "tilt towards China" (see above: *Political and legal landscape*) is real and if so, what the consequences will be. The increased trade and transit ties with Bangladesh may also be read against this geostrategic background.

## 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 enrollments 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). An increased emphasis on Buddhist traditions in celebrating festivals, such as [banning](#) meat and alcohol (The Print, 17 March 2023), can also be read as an effort to strengthen traditional culture. 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).

## 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>
- Political and legal landscape: long-lasting refugee problem - <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/bhutanese-refugee-crisis-a-brief-history/>
- 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: 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: values - <https://www.southasiamonitor.org/spotlight/bhutans-foreign-policy-guided-set-philosophical-and-cultural-values>
- Political and legal landscape: balancing act - <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/china-bhutan-agree-to-expedite-negotiations-to-resolve-border-dispute/articleshow/96984252.cms>
- Political and legal landscape: tilt towards China - <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3239549/why-bhutans-tilt-towards-china-may-significantly-change-regional-dynamics>
- Political and legal landscape: political prisoners - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/13/bhutan-free-long-term-political-prisoners>
- 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)
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- 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#:~:text=Eliminate%20all%20harmful%20practices%2C%20such%20as%20child%2C%20early%20and%20forced%20marriage%20and%20female%20genital%20mutilation>
- 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>
- Economic landscape: second most polluted city - <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/bhutans-happiness-faces-the-growing-pains-of-development/>
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- 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: transit agreement - <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/bangladesh-allow-bhutan-access-its-ports-trade-2023-03-23/>
- Economic landscape: numbers declined - <https://kuenselonline.com/leveraging-remittances-to-boost-bhutans-economy/>
- Economic landscape: presented - <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/2500>

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## WWL 2024: Church information / Bhutan

### Christian origins

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

### Church spectrum today

Due to security concerns, 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](#) in 2019 (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 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Bhutan

## Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

## Position on the World Watch List

Bhutan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	68	36
WWL 2023	66	40
WWL 2022	67	34
WWL 2021	64	43
WWL 2020	61	45

The persecution situation in Bhutan did not change very much in the WWL 2024 period although the score did increase by 1.9 points. Compared to WWL 2023, more incidents of violence were reported, and although the violence score doubled, it is still at a comparatively low level. Pressure increased the most in the *Community sphere of life*, but apart from pressure on individual Christians, pressure on churches remains high.

Christian converts continued to face difficulties when converting from a 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. Christian churches experienced harassment and difficulties to meet, especially after a letter from the Department of Law and Order of the Ministry of Home Affairs requested in April 2023 that Dzongkhag and Thormde Administrations allow neither religious gatherings without approval nor any programs not in keeping with Bhutanese tradition and cultural values.

## 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.

A country expert explained: "The Drukpa (People of the Dragon) came from Tibet in the 12th century bringing with them Tibetan Buddhism. This now dominates Bhutanese religious life through a large religious organization with more than 6,000 lamas (high-level monks) at eight major monasteries and 200 smaller 'gompas'. Conversions from the Drukpa sect of the Kagyupa School to other religions or sects are prohibited."

The difficulties for Christians lie not just with the government authorities emphasizing Buddhism. In the case of converts to Christianity, 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 of 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. 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,



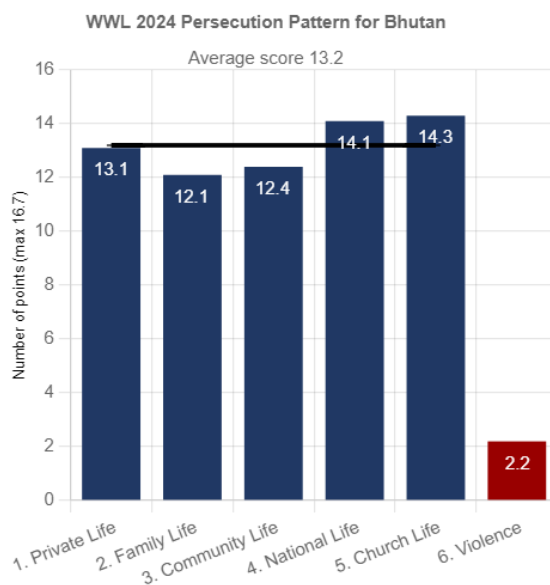
leaving Christians little chance of opting out. They put strong pressure on converts to reconvert. Christians in general are perceived as "newcomers" and a disturbance.

- **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. As pointed out by a country expert, in the ongoing census, government officials kept on telling Christian converts that they would be receiving Identification cards. However, even after several visits, these have not been provided. Likewise, all political parties back the government policy of 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 members put pressure on converts, but also friends, neighbors and work colleagues as well. Additionally, 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 2024 Persecution pattern for Bhutan shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Bhutan is very high and even increased from 13.0 points in WWL 2023 to 13.2 points in WWL 2024.
- 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 doubled to 2.2 points in WWL 2024. While violence is still at a low level compared to many other countries on the WWL, it is still very worrying for the Christian minority and leads to extra caution and self-censorship.

## 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 2024 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 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.50 points)**

Section 463 (A) of the country's Penal Code on Conversion 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 discreet way." Another expert added: "They always disguise it as a non-Christian activity." If their meeting is too obviously a gathering of Christians, it could lead to the owner of the rented house terminating their rent-contract.

**Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.25 points)**

Conversion is banned according to Section 463 (A) of the country's Penal Code but is unclearly defined (see above: *Political and legal landscape*), which gives the authorities and ethnic and

religious leaders leverage to put pressure on converts. For converts, the pressure from family and community is arguably strongest; conversion is frowned upon and a Christian convert can be pushed to the margins of society - or even outside it.

**Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (3.25 points)**

Christians avoid displaying Christian images when they are in public. Churches do not display Christian symbols in public since they are not officially recognized and do not wish to provoke a negative reaction from nationalist and radical Buddhists. As a country expert explains: "Since Christianity is not recognized, publicly declaring one's 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 in remote areas at night.

**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." History and literature classes - and even scout training - are all imbued with Buddhist teaching. 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 visit all schools and other educational institutions regularly and all students have to be present: They are supposed to bless all pupils by touching their heads, 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. According to Buddhist understanding, a convert to Christian faith is failing his parental legacy and is unable to attain the next level of life. Converts in particular face difficulties in getting issued with an electronic National Identity Card. Also, for day-to-day life, all citizens need a document referred to as a "non-objection certificate" (NOC) which is issued by village authorities to confirm that the individual in question is a good citizen and has caused no problems in the village. This certificate is needed for loan applications, registering property, applying for jobs and the renewal of ID cards. For Christians who do not have the Bhutanese citizenship, the NOC is impossible to get. Sometimes, Christians are threatened with being deleted from the census records, as the census form requires citizens to indicate their religious affiliation.

## 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 (with donations in money or in other forms), 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 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 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 reports 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. (3.75 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, since if they were known to be Christians, they would not stand a chance. Known Christians are also left out of subsidy schemes set up by the government or are deliberately scheduled to perform non-Christian rites by their superiors. 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, interrogations are more common and the census was also conducted to find out the number of Christians in some areas. It is not uncommon that officers go from house to house for seeking details of other Christians." 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 in obtaining such letters. And if they suc-

ceed, their children often face discrimination in school by being given lower grades, which in turn makes it difficult for them to qualify for higher education.

Concerning health services in Bhutan, a country expert noted: "For major surgery, there is a form where citizens need to mention their religion. This can lead to negligence from the hospital staff. Medical care is free in Bhutan, and the government will pay for treatments if you have the proper documents. However, Christians in remote areas are often marginalized and deprived of medical care."

## 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 the 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 misdemeanor", 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 almost certainly 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 in Bhutan - 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 "Checkpoint 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/fellowship. 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 (see: *Recent history*), in September

2019 the government stated (as part of the country's Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council): "Religious groups are free to practice without registering". However, this statement has not translated into more freedom for Christians or other minorities.

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

Bibles and other Christian materials cannot be produced in Bhutan and importing them is not allowed, unless they are brought in 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 out 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 out against persecution can also easily be perceived as criticizing the king and his family, which is unheard of and unthinkable.

**Block 5: Additional information**

Since Christianity has no official or legal status, no initiatives related to humanitarian activities are possible. 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 find themselves in difficulties. 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 presented by WWR must be understood as being minimum figures.*

Due to security concerns, no table showing details of violence targeting Christians is available for publication.

Persecution in Bhutan has never been particularly violent, since the authorities prefer to use other, less visible means against Christians. In the WWL 2024 reporting period, a few more violent incidents were reported than in WWL 2023, causing a rise in the score from a 'very low' level (1.1 points) to a 'low level' (2.2 points). For security reasons, no details can be provided. It should also be kept in mind that obtaining reports of incidents from Bhutan remains a challenge.



## 5 Year trends

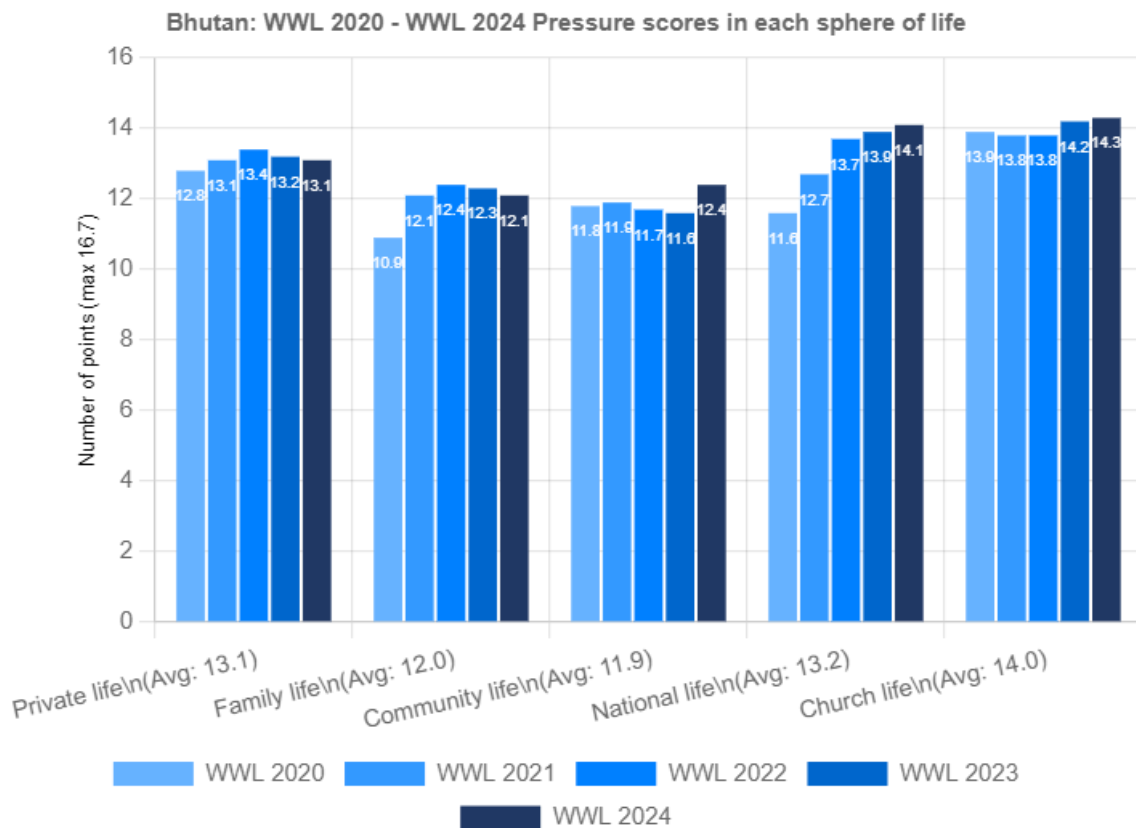
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

### 5 Year trends: Average pressure

Bhutan: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	13.2
2023	13.0
2022	13.0
2021	12.7
2020	12.2

In the last 5 WWL reporting periods, average pressure has been consistently between 12.2 and 13.2 points. It now appears to be levelling off at the 13.0/13.2 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 *National* and *Private life*. The *National sphere* reached new heights of pressure in WWL 2024, reflecting the nation's strong emphasis on its religious and cultural heritage.

## 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. In the WWL 2024 reporting period, there were more reports of violent incidents, although obtaining reports at all remains a challenge.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	Denied inheritance or possessions
Political and Legal	Forced divorce; Forced marriage
Security	-
Social and Cultural	-
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 pres-

sure 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: "Social Institutions and Gender Index: Bhutan", accessed 9 January 2024). While there were no reported instances of forced divorce in the WWL 2024 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, even in situations of ongoing 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.

Forced marriage is also a risk for Christian converts in Bhutan. Single converts, especially young women, fear being pressured into marriage with a non-Christian. Whilst no cases have been reported in the WWL 2024 reporting period, this is noted as an ongoing threat.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	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 can experience persecution through being disowned by their family or asked to leave the family home. 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 workplace. A country expert explains that Christian men may face "difficulty in seeking gainful employment". 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 2022 Bhutan):

- "The government continued its financial assistance for the construction of Buddhist temples and shrines as well as funding for Buddhist monks and monasteries. The Hindu Devi Panchayan Temple in Thimphu, funded by the government, approved by the King, and consecrated in 2019, formally opened on September 23 (2022). According to the NGO Minority Rights Group International, authorities gave Buddhist temples priority over Hindu temples in the licensing process." (page 3)
- "Members of the Hindu Dharmic Samudaya continued to cite strong official support for Hindu religious practice." (page 4)

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 20 July 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 more or less 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

- Persecution engines description: Mahayana Buddhism - <http://www.religionfacts.com/mahayana>
- Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere: stated - <https://kuenselonline.com/choosing-our-own-faith/>
- Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere: CPMS - <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 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 Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

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

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

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