

# FINAL WWL 2019 COUNTRY DOSSIER

## BANGLADESH

### LEVEL 3/EMBARGO

(Reporting period: 1 November 2017 – 31 October 2018)

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## Introduction

### Copyright Notice

### Introduction

World Watch List Bangladesh	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2019	58	48
WWL 2018	58	41
WWL 2017	63	26
WWL 2016	57	35
WWL 2015	51	43

*Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country was among the fifty highest scoring countries (Top 50) in the WWL 2015-2019 reporting periods.*

**Please note:** The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading "External links".

## WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Bangladesh

### Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12650940>

### Recent country history

Bangladesh has a long history of unrest and is a relatively young state, achieving independence from Pakistan as late as 1971. Since then, civilian governments and military rule have taken turns in power. Elections are regularly accompanied by much violence, with the opposition denounced as having ties with militant Islamic groups. Bangladesh has headed in an authoritarian direction since 2015 and has not had an effective parliamentary opposition since the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) boycotted national elections in 2014. Instead of parliamentary debate, 2015 saw the BNP taking to the streets and the government under Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina cracking down on free expression and civil society. Key opposition leaders were arrested, accused of serious offenses, some of which were trumped up. Many remained in hiding, fearing arrest. Opposition leader Khaleda Zia and her son have been arrested and sentenced in February and again in October 2018 as well. Security forces committed serious abuses including killings, “disappearances”, and arbitrary arrests, with few investigations or official prosecutions being made.

### The religious landscape

Home to almost 150 million Muslims, mostly Sunni, up until recently Bangladesh managed to stay clear of the kind of radicalism that has plagued other parts of the world. But unfortunately there are strong signs that this is changing. Around 9% of the population is Hindu and they suffer from attacks by radical Muslims as well. Christians are a tiny minority, experience marginalization and, if they belong to ethnic minorities, face a double vulnerability. Christian converts come quickly under pressure from either radical Islamic groups or the Islamic culture in their neighborhoods. They are facing much violence. Churches and all minority religions strive to stay clear of politics, although they notice a growing Islamic conservatism and radicalization in the country. Christian and other minorities are running several lobby groups.

### The political landscape

Traditionally, relations between Church and government have been good. Prime-Minister Sheikh Hasina even appointed a Catholic woman as her personal assistant in July 2014. But a series of killings of secular journalists as well as members of different religious minorities have scared the latter and made them act more cautiously. Although the series of killings appeared to cease, on 11 June 2018, a Communist blogger “vocal against religious fundamentalism” was [shot dead](#) by suspected Islamic militants on motorbikes in Sirajdhikan, central Bangladesh. The government struggles to fight the radical groups which are growing stronger, adding to the general insecurity. As national elections approach (scheduled for 30 December 2018), the government's top priority is to stay in power, consequently BNP politician Khaleda Zia was sentenced to an additional two years in prison on corruption charges in October 2018.

### The socio-economic landscape

Bangladesh is densely populated: It is the world’s eighth most populous nation with over 164 million people, and the third most populous Muslim nation after Indonesia and Pakistan. It is among the world’s poorest and is often ranked as one of the world’s most corrupt places. Its political system has

repeatedly been jolted by instability. Its territory is deeply vulnerable to the effects of climate change. And yet, throughout all this, Bangladesh has also been a source of positive news. As an April 2017 assessment by World Bank economists put it, the Bangladesh economy has been doing well, with economic growth exceeding 6%. In fact, as a 2017 International Monetary Fund report noted, the economy has been “strong and largely” stable since the mid-1990s. By 2024, Bangladesh could become the only upper-middle income economy in South Asia, according to the World Bank. A key driver has been the country’s \$26 billion clothing industry, which accounts for around 80% of its exports. As the economy has grown, the number of Bangladeshis living in poverty has fallen and social indicators have improved, with the government putting money into initiatives to empower women and improve food security. However, in 2016, the poor still made up 13.8% of the population. Growth has continued in recent years, even as a dangerous new challenge to the Muslim-majority nation became increasingly apparent — the threat of radical Islamic violence. In many cases, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group (IS) have taken credit for attacks.

The government of Sheikh Hasina has played down the threat from transnational terrorist groups time and again, blaming home-grown radicals linked to the political opposition instead. It is indeed true that the opposition has had close links with right-wing Islamists in the past. However, the tragic attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery restaurant on 1 July 2016 brought a change to this attitude. Located in the prosperous Dhaka district of Gulshan, home to wealthy Bangladeshis, expatriates and foreign embassies, the attack was carefully chosen for its international clientele. It marked the starting-point for a flurry of government raids on radical Islamic networks, which continues until now, although it is not always entirely clear if radical groups are being targeted or [opposition forces](#) as well.

## Concluding remarks

The persecution of Christians in Bangladesh is at a high level, but stable. The situation is particularly bad for Christian converts from a Muslim background. Since the large attack on Artisan Bakery in July 2016, the Islamic State group (IS) has claimed a number of attacks through its media affiliates, but the government has consistently denied any IS presence in the country. Other attacks have been claimed by local Islamist groups. Police have said that most of the suspected attackers were members of Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) - a banned Islamist group. There is no clear consensus on the veracity of the claims, even amongst the region's top terror analysts.

Christians continue to live in fear of possible attacks, although the immediate threat has decreased somewhat due to a stronger crackdown on radical Islamic groups by the authorities. Death threats are still issued against pastors, but not as widespread as in 2016. Forced marriage, rape, discrimination in the distribution of public resources and mob attacks against Christians are all increasingly common.

## External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Bangladesh

1. The political landscape: shot dead  
<https://www.ucanews.com/news/critic-of-religions-gunned-down-in-bangladesh/82551>
2. The socio-economic landscape: opposition forces  
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/13/bangladesh-crackdown-elections-loom>

## WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

### How many Christians?

Pop 2018	Christians	Chr%
166,368,000	869,000	0.5

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

### How did Christians get there?

Christianity made its first definite inroads into the region now called Bangladesh in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Portuguese traders and Roman Catholic missionaries reached its shores close to the city of Chittagong, in what was then called “Bengal Sultanate”, and built its first churches. The renowned Baptist missionary, William Carey, arrived at Serampore of West Bengal in 1793. This Englishman heralded a new missionary era in Bengal, translating and printing the Bible in Bengali and the first dictionary of the Bengali language. He also helped develop Bengali type-faces for printing and established Serampore Mission and College besides publishing newspapers and periodicals. The school system in Bangladesh is indebted to William Carey’s work. With Carey came the Baptist Missionary Society (British) in 1793, followed by Church Missionary Society (British) in 1805, Council for World Mission (British Presbyterian) in 1862, Australian Baptist Mission in 1882, New Zealand Baptist Mission in 1886, Oxford Mission (British Anglican) in 1895, Churches of God (American) in 1905, Seventh-Day Adventists in 1919, Assemblies of God in 1945, Santal Mission (Lutheran) in 1956, Bangladesh Mission of the Southern Baptist Convention (American) in 1957, and Association of Baptists for World Evangelism (American) in 1958. After the War of Independence in 1971, there was an influx of more Protestant missionary societies in Bangladesh.

### What church networks exist today?

Church networks: Bangladesh	Christians	%
Orthodox	140	0.0
Catholic	403,000	46.4
Protestant	220,000	25.3
Independent	362,000	41.7
Unaffiliated	3,000	0.3
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-118,000	-13.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>870,140</b>	<b>100.1</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	178,000	20.5
Renewalist movement	319,000	36.7

*Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. Roman Catholics: All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. Protestants: Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. Independents: Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). Unaffiliated Christians: Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. Doubly-affiliated Christians: Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. Evangelical movement: Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. Renewalist movement: Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.*

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

Roughly half of the Christian population is Roman Catholic, while the other half is split up into a variety of Protestant denominations such as Assemblies of God, Lutheran, Baptist, Brethren, Church of God, Seventh Day Adventists and others. There are also a number of Christians with a Muslim background.

## Religious context

Religious Context: Bangladesh	Numbers	%
Christians	869,000	0.5
Muslim	148,144,000	89.0
Hindu	15,354,000	9.2
Buddhist	1,086,000	0.7
Ethnoreligionist	736,000	0.4
Jewish	200	0.0
Bahai	11,300	0.0
Atheist	12,900	0.0
Agnostic	124,000	0.1
Other	31,160	0.0

OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

According to World Christian Database's estimates for 2018, 89% of the country's population is Muslim. While Bangladesh is largely ethnically homogenous - with 98% of the population being Bengali - minorities like the Chakma exist as well. Additionally, there are the so called "Hill Tribe People" (e.g. the Garo and the Santal) who include a large number of Christians among them. The Hill Tribe People are neglected and discriminated against by the authorities and harassed by the majority community. These Christians face a double vulnerability, being tribal and Christian.

## Notes on the current situation

Acts of violence confirm that radical Islam has developed from being a mere religious ideology into the establishment of terror networks. Bangladesh has witnessed a dangerous transformation led by religious groups that are similar to those that established terror groups in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Middle East. To date, the government has viciously fought against these groups but has always refused to admit the presence of Islamic State militants (IS) in Bangladesh. Attacks have been carried out nationwide, targeting cultural and political figures, one of the most recent attacks taking place in June 2018. The tension between secular values and radical Islam is growing rapidly, as shown when protesters forced a statue representing the Greek goddess of Justice to be removed from its place in front of the Supreme Court building in May 2017. The influx of hundreds of thousands of Muslim refugees from neighboring Myanmar could be used by radical groups as a rallying cry as well as for further increasing their number of followers. However, at the time of writing (December 2018), neither IS nor al-Qaeda appeared to be doing this.

## WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

### Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

With a score of 58 points, Bangladesh ranks 48th in WWL 2019.

### What type of persecution dominates?

**Islamic oppression:** The government is increasingly giving in to the demands of local Islamic groups, which monitor minorities, especially converts. These groups are instilling fear and many of them are inspired by international Islamic groups like Islamic State (IS).

**Religious nationalism:** There are over twice as many Buddhists in Bangladesh as Christians and these are found mostly among the indigenous people groups bordering India and Myanmar. Converts from Buddhism to Christianity are put under pressure.

**Ethnic antagonism:** Attempts are made at forcing new Christian believers of a tribal background to continue following the ancient customs of their tribal communities.

### Who is driving persecution?

As the number of Christians from a Muslim background is growing, they face restrictions and difficulties from radical Islamic groups, local religious leaders, and families. There are local fatwas implemented all over the country, especially in rural areas, and there are demands to introduce Sharia law by radical Islamic groups in order to show that the country belongs to the "House of Islam". Until now, these calls remain unheard. Local government officials create various obstacles for Christians, but the notable trend of the rise of attacks by the Islamic State group in the country has been countered by stricter scrutiny by the authorities and by security forces going into action against such groups.

### What it results in

Converts from a Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or an ethnic/tribal background suffer the most severe persecution in Bangladesh. They often gather in small house churches or secret groups due to fear of attack. Evangelistic churches - many of them Pentecostal - working among the Muslim majority face persecution, but even historical churches like the Roman Catholic Church are increasingly faced with attacks and death threats. Tribal Christians like the Santal, face a double vulnerability (belonging to both an ethnic and religious minority) and struggle with land-grabbing issues and violence directed against them. Christians among the Muslim Rohingya, who fled to Bangladesh, are facing harassment and strong pressure from their community as well.

## Violence

The following table is based on reported cases. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures.

Bangladesh	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018	1	104	16	6	27
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	4	57	3	8	101

*Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). Christians attacked refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related reasons. Christians arrested refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. Churches attacked refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. Christian-owned houses and shops attacked refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.*

## Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period

1. In May 2018, a Christian youth was killed and in August 2018 it was reported that a Catholic young woman [committed suicide](#) after having been forced to undress on video. Although this last incident was not included in the WWL scoring as a killing, it illustrates the vulnerability of Christians, especially women. Usually, such cases are not reported due to shame issues.
2. Six churches (or sites where Christians gather) were attacked. Examples are: On 20 January 2018, the Catholic church in Gopalgonj and in September 2018, a church in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. In this September attack, several Christians were injured.
3. At least 11 Christians have been detained and one had to stay in prison for several months. Details on this cannot be published for security reasons.
4. Christian Santals continue to face land-grabbing and an estimated 1500 are living as IDPs because of this.

## External Links - WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

1. Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: committed suicide  
<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/When-sexual-harassment-turns-into-blackmail-a-young-Catholic-woman-commits-suicide-44633.html>

## WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

### Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

### Position on World Watch List (WWL)

The WWL 2019 score for Bangladesh (58 points) is the same as in WWL 2018, although the situation on the ground has changed. While the score for violence decreased by more than two points, it is still at a very high level. The levels of pressure in all *spheres of life* showed increases. This reflects the difficult situation for converts - especially for the few Rohingya Christians (refugees from Myanmar currently residing in the country). The Christian minority in general still faces discrimination, neglect and violence as well.

### Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Bangladesh	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Medium
Ethnic antagonism	EA	Medium
Denominational protectionism	DPR	Weak
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Very weak
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Medium
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Weak

*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 (long version).*

#### Islamic oppression (Strong):

This engine affects all Christians in Bangladesh, although the country continues to be both a secular and an Islamic country according to the Constitution. It is increasingly difficult to see how this dual system can work in practice, especially as the government is giving in more and more to demands by local Islamic groups which are not tied to the opposition. These groups are watching minorities, especially converts. They are instilling fear and many of them are inspired by international Islamic groups like Islamic State (IS), although the authorities continue to deny any such links. Despite government rhetoric, these links are widely perceived to be real, which has increased fear in the whole population, and the government did decide to [ban chapters on jihad](#) in secondary-school textbooks in October 2017. Families and communities are drivers of persecution and monitor the activities of converts (especially in rural areas) and this restricts everyday life for converts more intensely than radical groups do at the moment. The fact that the government is fighting Islamic groups which are known to have connections with the political opposition party does not help bring calm to the volatile political situation.

#### Religious nationalism (Medium):

There are over twice as many Buddhists in Bangladesh as Christians and they are found mostly among the indigenous people groups concentrated in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, bordering India and Myanmar. Among these people groups, the tribal Chakma people are the most well-known. Over the

past years, an increasing number of Chakma have converted to Christianity. This has caused Buddhist and tribal leaders to put more pressure on converts. This is not only done by family, friends and community, but also by radical Buddhists aiming to strengthen local Buddhist and indigenous groups in resisting Christianity. The region is becoming increasingly volatile with the sudden influx of Muslim Rohingya refugees - an estimated 770,000 - crossing the border from Myanmar. Since around 300,000 Rohingya were already living in Bangladesh before this, this brings their number to more than one million. They are living in desperate circumstances and strongly challenge Bangladesh, still being one of the poorest countries. The insurgency group "Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army" (ARSA), which attacked border posts in Myanmar, is reported to be active in the Bangladeshi refugee camps. Thus this refugee problem could lead to a growing Islamic radicalism in Bangladesh, which adds to the government's nervousness. Despite all promises, does not seem likely that Myanmar will take back the refugees anytime soon; consequently, Bangladesh announced in November 2018 that the planned and agreed upon [repatriation](#) would only start in 2019, after the country's elections in December 2018.

**Ethnic antagonism (Medium):**

As the Chakma, Tripura and Marma are tribal groups, *Religious nationalism* is mixed with *Ethnic antagonism*. This means that new Christian believers of a tribal background are being forced to follow the age-old norms and values of their community, whether these are religious in nature or not.

**Dictatorial paranoia (Medium):**

Politics in Bangladesh is family business and at the moment, it is a competition between two women. Ruling Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League showed that she will do everything necessary to stay in power, including getting her rival, Khaleda Zia from the Bangladesh National Party, sentenced on corruption charges. The opposition decided to form an alliance in which the leader of the (mostly secular) Awami League has strengthened her Islamic ties and has begun to emphasize the country's Islamic foundations. Although Christians and other religious minorities enjoy more freedom than in many other Muslim countries, they can easily be used as scapegoats, especially as election and campaigning times are traditionally very volatile and violent in Bangladesh.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of Persecution: Bangladesh	IO	RN	EA	DPR	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	WEAK	VERY WEAK	-	MEDIUM	WEAK
Government officials	Strong	Medium	Medium	-	-	-	Strong	Weak
Ethnic group leaders	Medium	Strong	Strong	-	-	-	Weak	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Very strong	Very strong	Very strong	-	-	-	Weak	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	Weak	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	Very strong	Strong	Strong	-	-	-	Weak	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader	Strong	Very strong	Very strong	-	-	-	Weak	-

society), including mobs								
One's own (extended) family	Very strong	Very strong	Very strong	-	-	-	Very weak	-
Political parties	Medium	Medium	Medium	-	-	-	Medium	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Weak	Weak	Weak	-	Strong	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	Weak	Weak	Weak	-	-	-	Very weak	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

*The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology (long version).*

**Drivers of Islamic oppression:**

Muslim leaders in Bangladesh are often drivers of persecution targeting Christians. As the number of Christians from a Muslim background continues to grow, they are facing increasing restrictions and challenges from radical Islamic groups, local religious leaders and families. There are demands for introducing Sharia law by radical Islamic groups in order to show that the country belongs to the “House of Islam”. Local government officials create various obstacles for Christians, particularly for converts. A notable trend is the rise of IS atrocities in the country, targeting primarily free thinkers and minority religious groups including Christians (especially leaders and evangelists) and converts. Some political parties are cooperating with radical Islamic groups, e.g. with Jamat-e-Islam. Further, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), the opposition party, puts pressure on minority religious groups (including Christians) as these are seen as belonging to the ruling party’s camp. For converts, their own family as well as neighbors and friends are the drivers of persecution where they feel the strongest pressure.

**Drivers of Religious nationalism and Ethnic antagonism:**

Buddhist religious leaders, tribal leaders and families all act as persecutors in their respective regions as well, especially in the country's north. Local government officials can become drivers as well as their goal is to keep everything under control and this is potentially threatened by converts.

**Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:**

Political parties will do everything to stay in power (or to win power, as the opposition is concerned) and will make everything else second to reaching this goal. Government officials often give support, at least as long as they can reap personal benefit from it.

**Context**

In Bangladesh, a long-term political stand-off between government and opposition (and related families as politics is mainly family business) is taking place. This leaves the country in such political limbo, that the very real and serious threat from militant Islam sometimes seems to be of secondary importance. Its lethal reality was shown in a string of killings, targeting members of religious minority groups (including Christians), secularists and political activists, climaxing in 2016. Whether these killings – as the government continually claimed – had nothing to do with IS and have to be fully attributed to local militant groups, does not really matter. The largest of these local groups, Jamaat-

ul-Mujahideen (JMB) and the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), have pledged some sort of allegiance to IS, and so IS can be seen to be making inroads into Bangladesh.

Fighting against Islamists has continued throughout the WWL 2019 reporting period and in one incident, radical Muslims killed a secular blogger who had criticized radical religious groups, on 11 June 2018. The fact that society and politics are politically split at this crucial time adds to the difficulties Bangladesh faces and for its much needed fight against militant Islam.

It seems particularly unhelpful that the government is allowing Islamist demands to make inroads into the country, most likely in an effort to gain votes. This was shown by the government's decision in January 2017 to make its [school textbooks](#) more suitable for conservative Islamic groups. By having the letter 'o' now explained by depicting a devout Muslim girl's "orna" (a scarf worn at the beginning of puberty) is just one example of a creeping Islamic drive beginning in textbooks for first-graders. A textbook for sixth-graders replaced a trip report to the north of India (a neighboring country) with a report about the Nile in Egypt. Other books have changed as well, for example in no longer using Hindu or Christian-sounding first names. However, this new drive is not supporting violence: The government decided to [ban chapters on jihad](#) in secondary-school textbooks. In May 2018, the ruling Awami League accepted a 1 billion USD financial package from Saudi Arabia for building [560 mosques](#) across the country.

As a minority, Christians are trapped in the growing Islamic conservatism and try not to take sides. They will be affected by all decisions the government makes as well as by all actions the Islamic opposition carries out. Christians are perceived to be leaning towards the government and will thus be targeted. [Opposition BNP leader](#) Khaleda Zia and her son were sentenced to five years in prison on corruption charges in February 2018 and it is noteworthy that the sentence was not followed by large-scale demonstrations or calls for nationwide strikes. Compared to past years, all protests against the court's judgement were comparatively peaceful, with few casualties. However, this does not mean that the election season will not be volatile and possibly even violent, to the detriment of the Christian and other minorities. Elections are due to be held on 30 December 2018 and the growing nervousness was illustrated in an incident where an illegal bus fatally ran over two high-school students and demands for justice were ignored by the government. This led to several days of [increasing protests](#) by students, leading the government to accuse the opposition of trying to capitalize on the unrest. Another sign of the ruling party's nervousness is that thousands of opposition adherents are alleged to be [under criminal investigation](#).

In former Chief Justice Surendra Kumar Sinha's „A broken dream: Human rights, rule of law and democracy“, it is claimed that state security agents [intimidated and influenced judges](#) to rule in favor of the government, illustrating how fraught politics are in Bangladesh.

## Christian communities and how they are affected

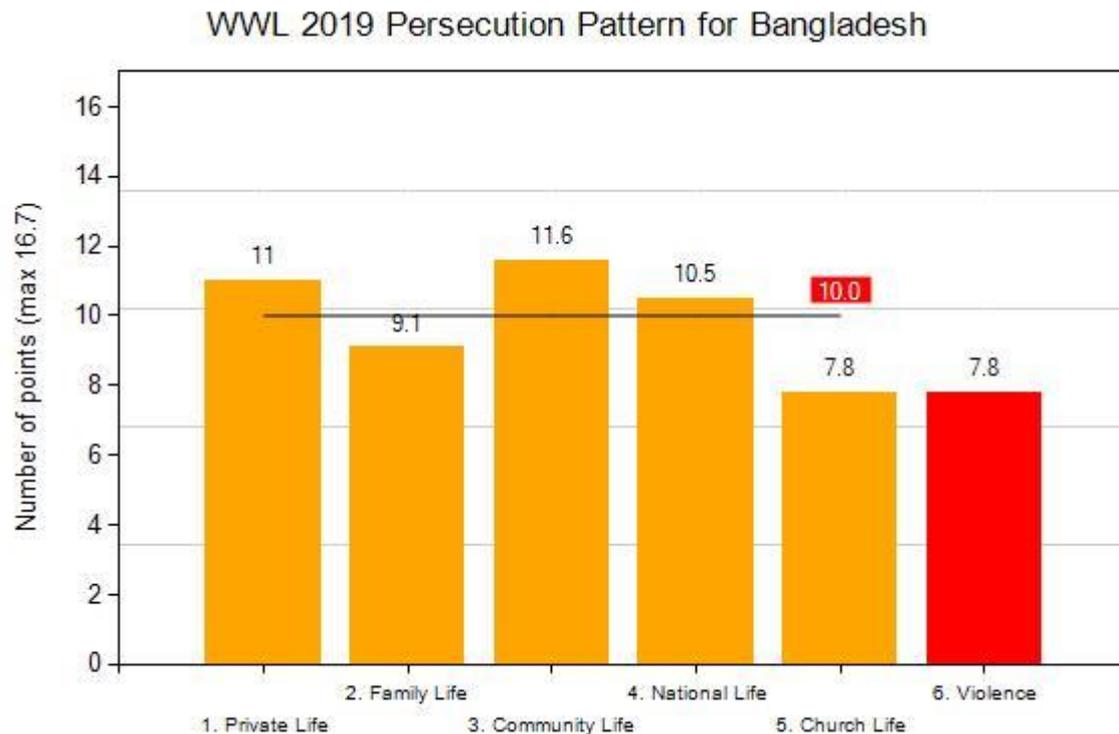
**Communities of expatriate Christians:** This group includes embassy personnel and foreign workers from the important textile sector. They face being observed and threatened by Islamic militants.

**Historical Christian communities:** This group includes the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Bangladesh (Anglican). They are frequently threatened and watched.

**Converts to Christianity:** This category includes converts from a variety of backgrounds, for instance: Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist. They are facing the strongest persecution, not least from their own families and communities, and often gather in groups secretly.

**Non-traditional Christian communities:** This group includes Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations. The Assemblies of God, for instance, mainly gather for worship in house-churches. They are frequently threatened and at times violently attacked.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The WWL 2019 Persecution pattern for Bangladesh shows:

- Overall, pressure on Christians in Bangladesh increased slightly in all *spheres of life*, causing the average pressure to rise from a score of 9.5 in WWL 2018 to 10.0. This reflects the growing pressure on converts to Christianity, including those among the Rohingya refugees who fled Myanmar in 2017.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Private* and *Community spheres*, where converts are particularly affected, but all Christians face pressure in the *National* and *Church spheres*.
- Violence against Christians decreased from 10.0 in WWL 2018 to 7.8 points in WWL 2019. There were less killings and attacks against churches than in the WWL 2018 reporting period.

### Private sphere:

Although the Constitution guarantees the freedom to profess any religion, Christians live with limited freedom. The most vulnerable ones are converts. If they reveal their identity in public, it will be almost impossible for them to continue living where they are because they face pressure from families, neighbors and religious leaders. People seen as converting or proselytizing can be detained and accused of criminal offences, as has happened in the WWL 2019 reporting period. Everyone will then monitor them and go at great lengths to prevent any possibility of them having fellowship with other

Christians, even to the point of blocking houses and roads. To privately own Christian books (such as a Bible) is risky. Christians who are not converts have more freedom in their private lives, however.

**Family sphere:**

Once converts are discovered, they often face the threat of divorce (if married) and can lose their inheritance rights, especially in rural areas. Organizing a baptism, a Christian wedding or a funeral can be difficult or even impossible. Children of Christians, not just of converts, are forced to study non-Christian teachings and use Islamic textbooks at school and are frequently mocked by other children, up to the point where they refuse to go to school or leave the house at all. Converts are often isolated from their families and may even be forced to leave their homes.

**Community sphere:**

Christians are also discriminated against in their business lives. Some Christians have had to give up their shops or other businesses due to pressure by the Muslim majority and boycotts. Children of converts often face discrimination at school. Some have been scolded and mocked by school teachers for being Christians. Pressure to renounce the Christian faith can become so unbearable for converts that they have to leave the community they live in.

**National sphere:**

Bangladesh has a secular government and its secularism is even laid down in the country's Constitution, which states at the same time that Islam is the state religion. Christians commonly experience discrimination when dealing with government authorities and are frequently slandered, especially in rural areas. Media reporting about Christians is often biased, predominantly from Islamic TV channels. Christians and others (like secular bloggers) have been accused of insulting Islam and some were even killed. In cases where Christians have been attacked, they have faced a high degree of unwillingness by the authorities to even start proper investigations. Christian schools and other institutions are being hindered through frequent threats made by radical Islamic groups. And even when authorities provided protection, the institutions were limited in their functioning by being observed or having to close down for a time.

**Church sphere:**

In general, churches are able to minister to their congregations. However, they are facing an increasing level of monitoring by authorities and radical Islamic groups alike, who especially target churches from the non-traditional category. Church services have been hindered both by these groups and also by tribal and ethnic minority leaders. Openly integrating converts into churches is impossible and it was reported that training has become more difficult as the Christian leaders being trained were expected to give suspicious villagers details about their whereabouts and the training. Openly distributing Bibles has been hindered and three pastors faced arrest for doing so.

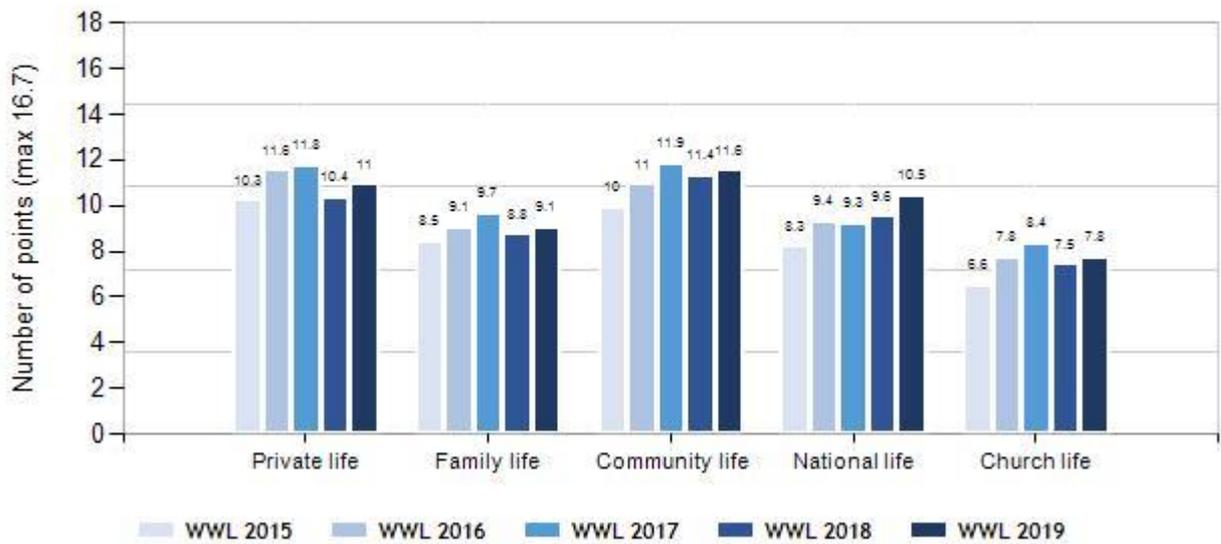
**Violence:**

For an overview of statistics on violence and for examples see above in the Short and Simple Persecution Profile section.

## 5 Year trends

The three charts below show the scores for pressure and violence over the last five reporting periods. The levels of pressure in all spheres of life and in pressure saw a spike in WWL 2017, due to increased open pressure by radical Islamic groups and accompanied by the killing of a number of Christians. However, the tide would seem to be ebbing now, although remaining at high/very high levels. A notable exception is the *national sphere*, where the pressure continues to increase gradually. In the chart for violence, the levels have reduced in the last reporting periods since the authorities have started to act decisively against Islamic militants.

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Bangladesh (Spheres of life)



WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: Bangladesh	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2019	10.0
2018	9.5
2017	10.2
2016	9.8
2015	8.7

### WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Bangladesh (Violence)



### Gender specific persecution

Despite the country being led by female politicians for many years, Bangladesh is still a country where it is dangerous and difficult to be a woman. Women and girls are prone to discrimination at the workplace, in society and even at home. Reports of rapes and sexual harassment, even in government schools, are increasingly common, although the phenomena are underreported due to social stigma. On the other hand, more and more women are empowered to join the workforce - e.g. 80% of all workers in the important garment sector are women - and are therefore gradually gaining more independence. In a conservative (Islamic) society, however, they remain more vulnerable than men when it comes to persecution. If they are converts, they will become isolated and put under high pressure to return to their former faith. Women and men alike are socially ostracized, a process which can continue for many years, if they are not forced to leave their village altogether. Until now, men are still the main breadwinners, so if they lose their job because of their faith - or their livelihood if they are shop-owners facing a boycott from society -, it will affect their whole family.

Marital laws are very complicated and women face disadvantages: In 2010, a law against domestic violence was introduced, which defines causing “economic loss” as an act of domestic violence and recognizes the right to live in the marital home. The law also empowers courts to provide for temporary maintenance to survivors of domestic violence. In 2012, the Law Commission of Bangladesh, supported by the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, completed nationwide research into reforms for Muslim, Hindu, and Christian personal laws. In May 2012, the cabinet approved a bill for optional registration of Hindu marriages. The Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs is also considering reforms to civil court procedures—especially on issuance of summons—that will improve family court efficiency. These small but important steps follow decades of pressure by women’s rights groups that have consistently demanded personal law and procedural reform. Muslims, Hindus and

Christians all have separate laws on marriage, separation and divorce. They are a mix of codified and uncodified (but officially recognized) laws, and are supplemented by authoritative decisions issued by the Supreme Court of Bangladesh and the High Court Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh. Buddhists are governed by Hindu personal laws.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

All religious minorities are prone to discrimination and violence, this includes Islamic minority groups like Shiite and Ahmadis as well as Hindu and Buddhist minorities. Hindus are the second largest religious group in the country behind Sunni Muslims. Hindus are subject to discrimination, atrocities and violence, and some women and girls have been forcefully converted. There are cases where Muslims have taken possession of their land and turned Hindu families into refugees. Indigenous people and religious minorities have been disproportionately affected by violence resulting from land-grabbing and the resulting protracted and new displacement.

As one expert explained on the situation of Hindus in more detail: Many Hindus have been unable to recover landholdings lost due to the now-defunct Vested Property Act. Although an Awami League government repealed the act in 2001, the new government did not take any concrete measures to reverse the property seizures that occurred under the act. The Vested Property Act was an East Pakistan-era law that allowed the government to expropriate "enemy" (in practice Hindu) lands. Under the law, the government seized approximately 2.6 million acres of land, affecting almost all Hindus in the country. According to a study conducted by a Dhaka University professor, nearly 200,000 Hindu families lost approximately 40,667 acres of land since 2001, despite the annulment of the act the same year.

## Future outlook

### The political outlook:

The government has made only limited progress in curbing radical Islamic groups. It is not only losing support from some parts of society, it also faces the challenge of an influx of radical international Muslims and has to deal with their local affiliates. As long as the ruling party continues to link all Islamic militancy to the opposition party and to woo Islamic radical groups in order to gain votes, it will be difficult to find a solution.

With the sentencing of opposition leader Khaleda Zia and her potential successor, her son Tarique Rahman, who currently lives in exile in London, it seems that the country is increasingly heading towards one-party rule. Whereas in the last elections, this was self-inflicted, as the opposition BNP chose to boycott elections, this time around the opposition is being actively excluded from the national political arena. As Bangladesh is [attracting the attention of radical Islamic groups](#), it may be tempting for the opposition to infuse fresh blood by joining forces with such groups. One sign for this might be that former minister of law, Kamal Hossain, announced a surprise [19-party-coalition](#) in October 2018 (later extended to 23 parties) to stand together in the election against the government. Radical Islamic party Jamaat-e-Islami is included in the coalition, a long term ally of the BNP.

### The outlook for Christians - viewed through the lens of :

- **Islamic oppression:** As long as Bangladesh is struggling with radical Islamic groups from inside the country and abroad, the Christian minority will be facing challenging times and especially converts are likely to be vulnerable to attack. The fact that the government is on the one hand fighting Islamic militancy and on the other hand is wooing certain other Islamist groups, does not give the Christian community much confidence for the future. Additionally, the country faces

serious challenges coming from the [madrassa system](#), regardless of whether the official number of 22,000 madrassas is correct or estimations of 70,000 apply. In officially registered madrassas around 2 million students are trained, whereas in not-registered, "private" madrassas there are said to be more than 4 million students. As in Pakistan, these madrassas are potential hotbeds for training students in hatred and violence, as became evident by the fact that nine of the perpetrators of the Dhaka attack in July 2016 were madrassa students. Christians are targeted by radical Muslims also because they are seen as being allied with the government since they prefer to retain the country's secularism according to the Constitution. Politics in the country frequently involves the use of violent means and often enough innocent by-standers suffer and are even killed.

- **Religious nationalism:** Given that Bangladesh has strong Hindu and Buddhist minorities as well, and that in times of increasing pressure from the majority society, religion becomes a particularly important factor of identity, converts from a Hindu and Buddhist background will continue to face strong opposition from their family, neighbors and religious leaders.
- **Ethnic antagonism:** What has been stated above concerning *Religious nationalism* applies to this persecution engine as well as they are blended.
- **Dictatorial paranoia:** Much will depend on the outcome of the elections on 30 December 2018. It may well be that politics in Bangladesh remain volatile and that - regardless of who wins - the ruling party will heed the call to introduce stricter forms of Islam (as voiced by conservative groups) in an effort to stay in power. AL and BNP have both a track record of fighting to keep in power by all means. Christians may find themselves in the crosshairs.

#### Conclusion:

Whatever the outcome of the December elections, it is not a good sign that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina saw it necessary to state: "Anyone who pronounces offensive comments against [Islam] or against the Prophet Muhammad, will be prosecuted according to the law", pointing out that the [religion of the country is Islam](#). This is a rather discouraging message for the future of the Christian minority in Bangladesh.

#### External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

1. Persecution engines: ban chapters on jihad  
<https://www.ucanews.com/news/bangladesh-govt-bans-jihad-from-madrassa-texts/80639>
2. Persecution engines: repatriation  
<https://www.ucanews.com/news/rohingya-repatriation-to-myanmar-delayed-to-next-year/83905>
3. Context: school textbooks  
[https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/22/world/asia/bangladesh-textbooks-radical-islam.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/22/world/asia/bangladesh-textbooks-radical-islam.html?_r=0)
4. Context: ban chapters on jihad  
<https://www.ucanews.com/news/bangladesh-govt-bans-jihad-from-madrassa-texts/80639>
5. Context: 560 mosques  
<https://www.ucanews.com/news/bangladeshs-560-mosques-project-comes-under-fire/82315>

6. Context: Opposition BNP leader  
[https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bangladesh-opposition-charge/bangladeshs-ex-pm-jailed-for-graft-plans-to-appeal-idUSKBN1FS129?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews&utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=feed&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+Reuters%2FworldNews+%28Reuters+World+News%29](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bangladesh-opposition-charge/bangladeshs-ex-pm-jailed-for-graft-plans-to-appeal-idUSKBN1FS129?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews&utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+Reuters%2FworldNews+%28Reuters+World+News%29)
7. Context: increasing protests  
<https://thediplomat.com/2018/08/students-protest-against-reckless-driving-roil-bangladesh/>
8. Context: under criminal investigation.  
<https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/opposition-arrests-10092018173451.html>
9. Context: intimidated and influenced judges  
<https://www.ucanews.com/news/former-chief-justices-book-causes-furore-in-bangladesh/83456>
10. Future outlook: attracting the attention of radical Islamic groups  
<https://asiancorrespondent.com/2018/05/why-bangladesh-makes-an-attractive-target-for-islamic-state-al-qaeda/#7lpe7pgEjXrbvqDq.97>
11. Future outlook: 19-party-coalition  
<https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/bangladesh-politics-10152018172137.html>
12. Future outlook: madrassa system  
<http://southasiamonitor.org/detail.php?type=sl&nid=18564>
13. Future outlook: religion of the country is Islam  
<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Sheikh-Hasina:-Whoever-insults-Islam-will-be-punished-according-to-the-law-45387.html>

## Additional Reports and Articles

### WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

### Open Doors article(s) from the region

A selection of articles is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

### World Watch Monitor news articles

Use the country search function at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

### Recent country developments

Use the country search function at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/> (password: freedom).