

World  
Watch  
Research

## Bhutan: Country Dossier

December 2020



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

December 2020

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

# Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
World Watch List 2021 .....	3
Copyright notice .....	4
Sources and definitions .....	4
Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic.....	4
External Links - Introduction .....	5
<b>WWL 2021 Short country profile / Bhutan .....</b>	<b>5</b>
Brief country details .....	5
Dominant persecution engines and drivers .....	5
Brief description of the persecution situation .....	5
Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period .....	6
<b>WWL 2021: Keys to understanding / Bhutan.....</b>	<b>6</b>
Link for general background information .....	6
Recent history .....	6
Political and legal landscape .....	6
Religious landscape .....	7
Economic landscape.....	9
Social and cultural landscape .....	10
Technological landscape .....	11
Security situation .....	12
Trends analysis .....	12
External Links - Keys to understanding .....	13
<b>WWL 2021: Church information / Bhutan .....</b>	<b>15</b>
Christian origins.....	15
Church spectrum today .....	15
External Links - Church information.....	15
<b>WWL 2021: Persecution Dynamics / Bhutan .....</b>	<b>15</b>
Reporting period .....	15
Position on the World Watch List .....	15
Persecution engines .....	16
Drivers of persecution .....	17
Areas where Christians face most difficulties .....	19
Christian communities and how they are affected .....	19

The Persecution pattern.....	19
Pressure in the 5 spheres of life.....	20
Violence.....	25
5 Year trends .....	25
Gender-specific religious persecution Female.....	27
Gender-specific religious persecution Male .....	28
Persecution of other religious minorities.....	28
Future outlook.....	29
External Links - Persecution Dynamics.....	29
<b>Further useful reports.....</b>	<b>30</b>

# Introduction

## World Watch List 2021

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	94	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.2	94	93	94	93	89
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.3	9.8	92	92	91	91	91
4	Libya	15.6	15.4	15.9	16.3	16.3	12.4	92	90	87	86	78
5	Pakistan	13.9	14.2	15.1	14.9	13.5	16.7	88	88	87	86	88
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	11.1	88	87	86	86	82
7	Yemen	16.6	16.6	16.5	16.7	16.7	3.9	87	85	86	85	85
8	Iran	14.5	14.5	13.9	15.7	16.5	10.6	86	85	85	85	85
9	Nigeria	13.3	13.2	13.9	14.1	14.1	16.7	85	80	80	77	78
10	India	13.0	12.9	13.5	14.9	13.7	15.4	83	83	83	81	73
11	Iraq	13.6	14.6	14.2	14.8	13.8	11.5	82	76	79	86	86
12	Syria	13.3	13.9	13.5	14.5	14.0	12.0	81	82	82	76	86
13	Sudan	13.4	13.4	13.7	13.6	15.7	9.1	79	85	87	87	87
14	Saudi Arabia	15.1	13.9	14.4	15.8	16.6	2.2	78	79	77	79	76
15	Maldives	15.4	15.5	13.9	15.8	16.6	0.4	77	78	78	78	76
16	Egypt	12.5	13.2	11.5	12.7	11.0	14.1	75	76	76	70	65
17	China	12.6	9.7	12.0	13.2	15.4	11.1	74	70	65	57	57
18	Myanmar	11.9	12.0	13.1	12.9	12.3	11.9	74	73	71	65	62
19	Vietnam	12.1	8.8	12.7	14.0	14.5	10.0	72	72	70	69	71
20	Mauritania	14.3	14.0	13.5	14.1	13.6	1.9	71	68	67	57	55
21	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	1.3	71	73	74	73	71
22	Laos	12.1	10.2	13.6	13.5	14.3	6.9	71	72	71	67	64
23	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.5	70	70	69	68	67
24	Algeria	13.9	13.9	11.5	13.1	13.4	3.9	70	73	70	58	58
25	Turkey	12.5	11.5	10.8	13.3	11.6	9.3	69	63	66	62	57
26	Tunisia	12.0	13.1	10.4	11.5	13.2	7.4	67	64	63	62	61
27	Morocco	12.6	13.5	11.2	12.4	14.1	3.7	67	66	63	51	49
28	Mali	9.4	8.2	12.7	10.3	11.5	15.4	67	66	68	59	59
29	Qatar	14.0	13.9	10.8	13.1	14.1	1.5	67	66	62	63	66
30	Colombia	11.4	8.8	12.4	11.0	9.7	13.9	67	62	58	56	53
31	Bangladesh	11.5	10.3	13.0	11.3	10.1	10.6	67	63	58	58	63
32	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.0	9.4	11.8	14.3	67	66	48	-	-
33	Tajikistan	14.0	12.3	11.9	12.5	13.2	2.2	66	65	65	65	58
34	Nepal	12.4	9.7	9.9	13.0	12.3	8.5	66	64	64	64	53
35	CAR	9.0	8.6	13.1	9.6	9.9	15.6	66	68	70	61	58
36	Ethiopia	9.9	8.5	10.7	10.3	10.8	14.4	65	63	65	62	64
37	Mexico	10.3	8.1	12.4	10.7	10.3	12.6	64	60	61	59	57
38	Jordan	13.1	13.9	11.4	11.6	12.4	2.0	64	64	65	66	63
39	Brunei	13.9	14.6	10.7	10.9	13.5	0.7	64	63	63	64	64
40	DRC	8.0	7.9	11.2	9.4	11.6	16.1	64	56	55	33	-
41	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	11.0	12.5	13.4	2.4	64	64	63	63	56
42	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.0	12.3	15.7	64	60	54	38	-
43	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	11.9	12.7	13.8	0.0	64	61	64	62	61
44	Oman	13.2	13.5	10.3	12.5	13.0	0.9	63	62	59	57	53
45	Mozambique	9.3	7.6	11.3	7.9	11.1	16.1	63	43	43	-	-
46	Malaysia	12.1	14.3	12.9	11.5	10.0	2.4	63	62	60	65	60
47	Indonesia	11.5	11.4	12.4	10.7	9.3	7.8	63	60	65	59	55
48	Kuwait	13.2	13.5	9.9	12.2	13.2	1.1	63	62	60	61	57
49	Kenya	11.7	9.2	10.5	8.0	10.3	12.8	62	61	61	62	68
50	Comoros	12.5	11.1	11.4	11.3	14.2	1.9	62	57	56	56	56

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
51	Cuba	10.9	7.7	11.8	12.9	13.4	5.4	62	52	49	49	47
52	Sri Lanka	12.2	9.1	11.7	12.2	9.7	7.0	62	65	58	57	55
53	UAE	13.4	13.3	9.7	12.0	12.4	1.1	62	60	58	58	55
54	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.6	10.6	62	60	52	45	47
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.2	10.4	12.0	1.3	58	57	56	54	48
56	Palestinian Territories	12.5	13.3	9.1	10.4	11.7	0.9	58	60	57	60	64
57	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	10.2	58	55	52	53	59
58	Russian Federation	12.3	8.0	10.2	10.5	12.1	3.9	57	60	60	51	46
59	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.0	56	56	56	56	57
60	Bahrain	12.1	12.5	9.1	10.7	10.5	0.9	56	55	55	57	54
61	Azerbaijan	12.8	9.8	9.4	11.1	12.6	0.0	56	57	57	57	52
62	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	3.7	53	56	48	40	-
63	Nicaragua	6.9	4.6	9.9	11.3	10.0	8.1	51	41	41	-	-
64	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.9	48	48	43	-	-
65	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	12.0	47	48	47	46	53
66	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	5.9	47	45	46	-	-
67	Honduras	6.8	5.0	10.6	7.6	9.0	7.6	46	39	38	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	10.1	11.4	7.2	46	43	42	-	-
69	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.0	43	44	44	-	-
70	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	0.6	43	43	43	-	-
71	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	9.8	0.7	43	41	42	-	-
72	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	8.1	42	42	41	-	-
73	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.3	42	42	43	-	-
74	El Salvador	6.6	4.9	9.8	4.2	8.7	7.8	42	38	30	-	-

## Copyright notice

**No copyright** - This report is the property of World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge WWR as the source.

## 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).
- 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”.
- The WWL 2021 reporting period was 01 October 2019 - 30 September 2020.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

## Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

In the WWL 2021 reporting period, travel restrictions and other measures introduced by the governments of various countries to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic did cause delays and create the need for restructuring grass-roots research in some cases. Through the agile cooperation of Open Doors field networks, research analysts, external experts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that the WWL 2021 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

## External Links - Introduction

- Sources and definitions: World Watch List Documentation - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>

# WWL 2021 Short country profile / Bhutan

## Brief country details

In the table below, the number of Christians shown is an Open Doors (OD) estimate.

Bhutan: Population (2020 UN estimate)	Christians	Chr%
835,000	30,000	OD estimate

Bhutan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	64	43
WWL 2020	61	45
WWL 2019	64	33
WWL 2018	62	33
WWL 2017	61	30

*Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods*

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

*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.

## Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

Due to security concerns, no specific examples are published here.

## WWL 2021: Keys to understanding / Bhutan

### Link for general background information

- [Bhutan country profile - BBC News](#)

### 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 Lhentshok (Commission for Religious Organizations).” (Source: [A/HRC/42/8/Add.1](#), page 8.) This has been a welcome statement, but Christians still have not been 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.

### 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). 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 12 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 in society, 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 involved in criticizing the king and the government has been jailed and convicted under this Act.

Elections in October 2018 saw a new party being voted into power and there had been some [mud-slinging](#), which was rather unusual for the country (Get Religion, 23 October 2018). However, it remains true that there are more important institutions in the country than the parliament (referred to as the National Council).

Country observers say that so far the new government's [track record](#) is good and it has kept several promises for improving the life of the people (South Asia Analysis Group, 31 March 2019). The [popularity](#) of the government has taken a nose-dive, however, due to the (pre-COVID-19) economic downturn Bhutan is facing (South Asia Analysis Group, 15 February 2020). Minorities are able to vote and stand for elections, but the voice of religious minorities in particular is not strongly heard in society or government. Civil and political rights still have a long way to go as was shown when a journalist was given a [three-months-sentence](#) in August 2018, calling into question the country's commitment to freedom of expression (The Diplomat, 28 August 2018).

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 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). This may well drive Bhutan back into India's arms, especially as the true addressee of China's claim seems to have been India. 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.

Christians are hoping for more room to manoeuvre, after the government announced that registration is not a prerequisite for religious meetings. 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 at present.

## Religious landscape

Bhutan: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	30,000	3.6
Muslim	1,974	0.2
Hindu	93,777	11.2
Buddhist	681,114	81.6



Ethno-religionist	27,639	3.3
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	99	0.0
Atheist	0	0.0
Agnostic	237	0.0
Other	0	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020).  
(Adapted according to OD-estimate)

Most Christians come from a Nepalese background, many of whom are living in the south. According to the estimates in the table above, 81.6% 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, accessed 17 December 2020), 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 even 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) (South Asia Analysis Group, 26 July 2019). There are efforts to make repatriation agreements, but in the meantime the situation has changed. According to reports (e.g. from the Bertelsmann Transition Index [Country Report 2020](#)), 90,000 refugees have already moved to third countries, particularly the USA, leaving "only" 8,500 refugees in Nepal at the beginning of 2019. 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 due course. So far, the government has denied registration or legal status to Christian institutions, and churches that applied for registration have continued to await approval from the government's Commission for Religious Organizations (CRO).

## Economic landscape

According to [UNDP 2019 report](#) (page 300 onwards):

- **Gross National Income (2011 PPP USD):** 8,609
- **Rate of multidimensional poverty:** 14.7%; 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 2.29% of the country's GDP

According to [World Bank's October 2019 update](#) (accessed July 2020):

- Bhutan is classified as a lower middle income country, but is improving
- **GDP per capita (PPP constant international 2017 USD):** 11,345
- **GDP growth rate (2018):** 3.0%
- **Poverty gap at 5.50 USD a day (2011 PPP):** 12.1%

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 traditionally had been visiting the country in increasing numbers. However, in recent years, Chinese tourists had become the largest group, so the effects of the COVID-19 crisis were particularly strongly felt. Another development is a marked growth in [private cars](#), a boom the country is ill-equipped for (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).

Trade depends greatly on India, since an estimated 80% of all goods are imported from India. While tourism is a way of "rubbing shoulders" with foreign cultures and of opening up, its importance is much more an economic factor: International tourists are obliged to spend a certain amount of money daily thus greatly contributing to the country's levels of hard currency. However, tourism always influences a country's traditions, a process Bhutan would prefer to avoid. The country's "National Development Plan 2030", [presented](#) in June 2019, does not bring any surprises and basically emphasizes all the branches named already (South Asia Analysis Group, 31 July 2019). State-owned enterprises make up 50% of Bhutan's tax revenue and 85% of this revenue comes from hydropower.

According to the already mentioned [BTI Country Report 2020](#): "In 2018, Bhutan met two of the three eligibility thresholds to graduate from the status of Least Developed Country (LDC) – the Gross National Income (GNI) Index and the Human Asset Index. Bhutan's GNI per capita of \$2,400 in March 2018 exceeded the required three-year average threshold of \$1,242. Bhutan also improved its Human Asset Index from 45 to 73 in 2018, as a result of higher secondary school enrollment. The government, however, requested that the country's graduation from LDC status be postponed until 2023 to better prepare the country for the shortfall in financial aid that would result from the loss of its LDC status." 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 years programs (ADB, Bhutan Development Effectiveness Brief, October 2020).

While the COVID-19 crisis has not affected Bhutan greatly from a health perspective. According to [WHO records](#) (accessed 17 December 2020), the country registered 440 infections in 2020 and no deaths. Nevertheless, the World Bank did give five million USD as [emergency help](#) (World Bank, 27 April 2020). Given how dependent Bhutan is on the tourist industry, an estimated 63% of households rely on tourism as their source of income, the economic fallout of the pandemic will be far stronger than the public health one, as Bhutan was effectively closed to all travel for several months. A [lockdown](#) imposed in August 2020 shows the seriousness of this challenge (Reuters, 11 August 2020).

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 will affect them disproportionately.

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the [UNDP 2019 report](#) (page 300) and the [World Factbook](#) (updated April 2020):

- **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:** 42.3%
- **Literacy rate is:** 57% (of population 15 years and older)
- **Mean years of schooling:** 3.1 years
- **Health and education indicators:** In Bhutan, 3.7 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's October 2019 update](#) (accessed July 2020):

- **Age:** 25.3% of the population are below the age of 14, 6.1% are above the age of 65
- **Education:** The primary school enrollment rate is 100.1%
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 2.3%; the rate of vulnerable employment is 71.5%
- **IDPs/Refugees:** Bhutan has an observer status in the UN's IOM, there is no data available.

According to the [UN Global Human Development Indicators](#) (2019):

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a score of 0.617, Bhutan ranks 134th 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:** 71.5 years
- **Median age:** 28.1 years
- **Gender inequality:** With a score of 0.436, Bhutan scores 99th in a list of 162 countries on the Gender Inequality Index

- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 2.2% and 71.3% of the population are in vulnerable employment. The rate of unemployed youth is 9.6%

According to the [CIA World Factbook](#), 22% of the population are today of Nepalese ethnicity (mainly the Lhotshampas), but some estimates run as high as 40%. Some Bhutanese are of tribal origin, others are either ethnic Tibetan or are of Tibetan and South Asian origin. As Bhutanese life is closely connected with the Buddhist religion and culture, anyone not adhering to Buddhism is watched with suspicion.

Bhutan has experienced a strong positive development in almost all the relevant international indices measuring social and economic development. Although investment in education has increased over recent years, and the average years a child stays at school has increased as well, the literacy rate is still low. The government is struggling to offer the younger generation good career prospects, even though Bhutan has tried to diversify its economy, strengthen exports and open up to the world. Still, many youth opt to go to India to advance their education and career opportunities. Given how closely the Bhutanese economy is tied to the Indian, each Indian economic downturn is strongly felt in the country, too. These close ties have been strongly felt in the COVID-19 crisis, too, as India has been heavily affected by the pandemic.

Despite all efforts, there is a shortage of skilled labor and the government had to relax its self-set ceiling limiting the number of migrant workers in order to cope with the demand for labor in hydropower projects. In 2017, there were an estimated 53,000 [migrant workers](#) in Bhutan, predominantly from India (Kuensel, 18 May 2017).

Bhutan is famous for its [Gross National Happiness Index](#) (OPHI, accessed 17 December 2020). 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).

There is barely a public social security net in Bhutan and assistance comes mainly from the (wider) family. 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.

## Technological landscape

According to [World Internet Stats](#) (accessed July 2020):

- **Internet usage:** 51.5% penetration - survey date: December 2019
- **Facebook usage:** 53.5% penetration – survey date: January 2020

According to World Bank's country profile (2018):

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 93.3 per 100 people

Bhutan is not included in Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net Report 2020](#).

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 the numbers as seen above. 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. This position 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's 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 (referred to in the "Political and legal landscape" above) were actually directed more to India than to Bhutan and it is too early to say whether they pose a serious security threat to Bhutan. 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.

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 special challenges from the general security situation.

## Trends analysis

### 1) The government is wary of introducing greater civil freedoms

The Bhutanese government fears that greater civil freedoms might result in changes, divisions and unrest within the country. Due to its geostrategic vulnerability, such unrest could be exploited by foreign forces. Such fears can quickly grow in a worsening economic environment. So far, the government's explanation about the registration of religious groups (stated before the UN in September 2019) did not translate into less pressure for Christians on the ground.

### 2) The balancing act between India and China continues

Bhutan is a tiny land-locked country between the two most populous countries in the world, 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. And Bhutan will have to step up its game, as the

country threatens to become just a [pawn on the chessboard](#) as China and India battle it out (The Diplomat, 23 July 2020).

### 3) There are indications that Buddhism might be losing significance

Bhutan's biggest fear is arguably that it is losing its traditionally strong Buddhist culture to an increasing Western influence. There is already a notable drop in enrolments to monastic institutions which might indicate that Buddhism is losing significance. This would be a severe threat to the country's culture and tradition. Such a trend could have both positive and negative effects on religious freedom in the country and is closely connected to Trend 1.

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.

However, in the near future, it seems unlikely that the Christian community in Bhutan will get the protection and freedom it is hoping for. The future of the Christian minority will continue to be determined by how *Religious nationalism* develops (the country's main Persecution engine). Also, the economic hardships people are experiencing due to the COVID-19 crisis, might cause a renewed emphasis on religion, meaning Buddhism.

## External Links - Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: Bhutan country profile - BBC News - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12480707>
- Recent history: A/HRC/42/8/Add.1 - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/session42/Pages/ListReports.aspx>
- 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: mud-slinging - <https://www.getreligion.org/getreligion/2018/10/22/is-sane-political-discourse-a-lost-cause-even-a-small-himalayan-buddhist-nation-faces-trolls>
- Political and legal landscape: track record - <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/2443>
- Political and legal landscape: popularity - <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/2569>
- Political and legal landscape: three-months-sentence - <https://thedi diplomat.com/2018/08/when-freedom-of-expression-isnt-free-journalism-facebook-and-censorship-in-bhutan/>
- Political and legal landscape: assertiveness - <https://thedi diplomat.com/2019/07/is-india-losing-its-grip-on-bhutan/>
- Political and legal landscape: Bhutanese state territory - <https://thedi diplomat.com/2020/07/whats-behind-chinas-expansion-of-its-territorial-dispute-with-bhutan/>
- Religious landscape description: Vajrayana Buddhism - <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vajrayana>
- Religious landscape description: Constitution - <https://www.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Constitution-of-Bhutan-Eng-2008.pdf?x50504>
- Religious landscape description: refugees - <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/2497>
- Religious landscape description: Country Report 2020 - <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard-BTN.html>
- Economic landscape: UNDP 2019 report - <http://www.hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf>

- Economic landscape: World Bank's October 2019 update - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bhutan>
- Economic landscape: second most polluted city - <https://thediomat.com/2018/05/bhutans-happiness-faces-the-growing-pains-of-development/>
- Economic landscape: private cars - <https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2019/07/24/car-boom-brings-gridlock-misery-to-green-and-happy-bhutan.html>
- Economic landscape: environment - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/bhutan-compromise-forests-pay-national-debt-181107125123352.html>
- Economic landscape: presented - <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/2500>
- Economic landscape: BTI Country Report 2020 - <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard-BTN.html>
- Economic landscape: implement projects - <https://www.adb.org/publications/bhutan-development-effectiveness-brief-2020>
- Economic landscape: WHO records - <https://covid19.who.int/region/searo/country/bt>
- Economic landscape: emergency help - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/04/16/world-bank-fast-tracks-5-million-for-bhutans-covid-19-coronavirus-response>
- Economic landscape: lockdown - <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-bhutan-idUSKCN2570U0>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNDP 2019 report - <http://www.hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Factbook - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/attachments/summaries/BT-summary.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Bank's October 2019 update - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bhutan>
- Social and cultural landscape: UN Global Human Development Indicators - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/BTN>
- Social and cultural landscape: CIA World Factbook - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bt.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: migrant workers - <http://www.kuenselonline.com/53000-foreign-workers-in-the-country/>
- Social and cultural landscape: Gross National Happiness Index - <https://ophi.org.uk/policy/gross-national-happiness-index/>
- Social and cultural landscape: stigmatized - <https://thediomat.com/2018/11/bhutan-the-mental-state-of-the-happy-kingdom/>
- Social and cultural landscape: increasing number of drug addicts - <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/26/addicted-in-bhutan/>
- Technological landscape: World Internet Stats - <https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#bt>
- Technological landscape: Freedom on the Net Report 2020 - <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores>
- Technological landscape: the whole country - <http://www.bbs.bt/news/?p=96529>
- Technological landscape: modernization - <https://www.businessinsider.sg/bhutan-happiness-technology-2018-8/>
- Security situation: help - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/06/china-india-bhutan-standoff-disputed-territory>
- Trends analysis: pawn on the chessboard - <https://thediomat.com/2020/07/chinas-bhutan-gambit/>



## WWL 2021: 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

No details are available for publication.

### 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)

## WWL 2021: Persecution Dynamics / Bhutan

### Reporting period

1 October 2019 - 30 September 2020

### Position on the World Watch List

Bhutan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	64	43
WWL 2020	61	45
WWL 2019	64	33
WWL 2018	62	33
WWL 2017	61	30

*Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods*

The increase in score by 2.6 points in WWL 2021 (back to the level of WWL 2019) was caused by an increase of reports in the *Family* and the *National spheres of life*. Pressure remains very high in all *spheres of life*, reflecting in particular the continued difficulties faced by Christian converts from Buddhism or ethnic-animist religion. They are not recognized in society and are therefore neglected, often being shunned by fellow citizens and denied official documents by the



authorities. Christian children often experience discrimination at school.

## Persecution engines

Bhutan: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Not at all
Religious nationalism	RN	Very strong
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Weak
Clan oppression	CO	Weak
Christian Denominational protectionism	CDP	Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Not at all
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

*The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.*

### Religious nationalism - Buddhist (Very strong)

A continuing emphasis on [Mahayana Buddhism](#) as the country's spiritual heritage makes life hard for the Christian minority. Bhutan had been a Buddhist kingdom for centuries. Even after introducing a constitutional monarchy in 2001 and installing democratic elections with the new Constitution in 2008, the country continues to give a dominant role to Buddhism. Under Article 3(1) of the Constitution, "Buddhism is the spiritual heritage of Bhutan", which promotes amongst other things "the principles and values of peace, non-violence, compassion and tolerance". Additionally, it says that "it is the responsibility of all religious institutions and personalities to promote the spiritual heritage of the country".

Buddhism is thus not explicitly defined as the state religion. Instead, the Constitution defines Bhutan as a secular state and affirms religious tolerance. This is, however, stronger on paper than in reality. Buddhism is heavily incorporated into people's daily lives and is strongly evident in the political, social, cultural and even economic activities of the country. An illustration of this close relationship can be seen in the so-called "dzongs". These are administrative centers with one department for political administration and another for the religious authorities, which often includes a Buddhist temple and accommodation for monks.

And it is not just government authorities emphasizing Buddhism; for converts, neighbors, friends and their own families can become another source of pressure. No Christian congregation has ever been allowed to build a church structure yet. All Christian fellowships remain underground. Especially in rural areas, Buddhist monks oppose the presence of Christians; the authorities do nothing to protect Christians and most officials tend to side with the monks.

**Clan oppression (Weak):**

Another source of pressure comes from shamans following the traditional animistic *Bön* belief. Although most citizens are not adherents to this faith exclusively, they will observe certain rites and traditions, especially in rural areas. This relates for example to festivals or outstanding events in family life (such as a birth or a death). Converts to Christianity who do not wish to participate in these rites and traditions will be put under pressure and face opposition and exclusion. The fusion of tribal belief and Buddhism has also been a source of persecution, especially in the central and eastern parts of the country.

**Drivers of persecution**

<b>Bhutan: Drivers of persecution per engine</b>	<b>IO</b>	<b>RN</b>	<b>ERH</b>	<b>CO</b>	<b>CDP</b>	<b>CPCO</b>	<b>SI</b>	<b>DPA</b>	<b>OCC</b>
	-	VERY STRONG	WEAK	WEAK	WEAK	-	-	-	-
Government officials	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ethnic group leaders	-	Strong	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	-	Medium	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
One's own (extended) family	-	Very strong	-	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-
Political parties	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

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

### Drivers of Religious nationalism - Buddhist

- **Extended family (Very strong):**  
For converts, family members are by far the strongest driver of persecution. Conversion is unacceptable and brings shame upon the family. The family will do its best to bring the convert back to his or her original faith. If everything fails, converts are disowned by their families. As life in Bhutan is still very communal and the proximity and protection of the family is important, being disowned is felt very strongly by converts.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):**  
Buddhist (and even Hindu) leaders are also drivers of persecution. They see themselves first and foremost as preservers of Bhutan's Buddhist culture and heritage (or the Hindu minority). They put strong pressure on converts to reconvert. Christians in general are perceived as "newcomers" and a disturbance.
- **Ethnic group leaders (Strong):**  
Religion is closely tied to ethnic identity, so if individuals decide to change their religion, this will weaken the group. Therefore, ethnic group leaders will oppose Christian influences and speak out against them as strongly as they can.
- **Government officials (Strong) and Political parties (Medium):**  
Government officials 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. Likewise, all political parties back the government policy on preserving and protecting Buddhism.
- **Normal citizens (Medium):**  
Especially in the rural areas, society is closely-knit and any deviation is perceived as wrong and as disturbing the harmony. Therefore, not only family puts pressure on converts, but friends, neighbors and work colleagues as well.

### 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 works, expel them.
- **Ethnic group leaders (Strong):**  
Animism is especially strong in the central and eastern parts of the country and just like the main religion, closely tied to ethnicity. Someone (e.g. a convert to Christianity) who stops

adhering to animist rituals not only shuts themselves out from the local community; they are also seen as potentially endangering the whole village (due to the spirits being angered).

- **Normal citizens (Medium):**

Not only family members put pressure on converts to recant; this will also be done by friends, neighbors and work-colleagues.

## Areas where Christians face most difficulties

There are no geographical hotspots of persecution in Bhutan.

## Christian communities and how they are affected

**Communities of expatriate Christians:** The very few expatriate Christians can only obtain a limited visa and are not able to join the existing house churches. They are therefore involuntarily isolated and scored as a separate WWL category.

**Historical Christian communities:** In the 19th century, a small Roman Catholic presence existed under the Indian diocese of Darjeeling, and this is still present today. They are tolerated to a certain extent, as they tend to keep to themselves. However, they lack official recognition and are subject to discrimination just like all other Christian denominations. The church is small and received its [first indigenous priest](#) during the WWL 2021 reporting period (UCA News, 10 December 2019).

**Converts to Christianity:** Converts from a Buddhist, Hindu or ethnic background face strong pressure from family, friends and neighbors to return to Buddhism, Hinduism 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.

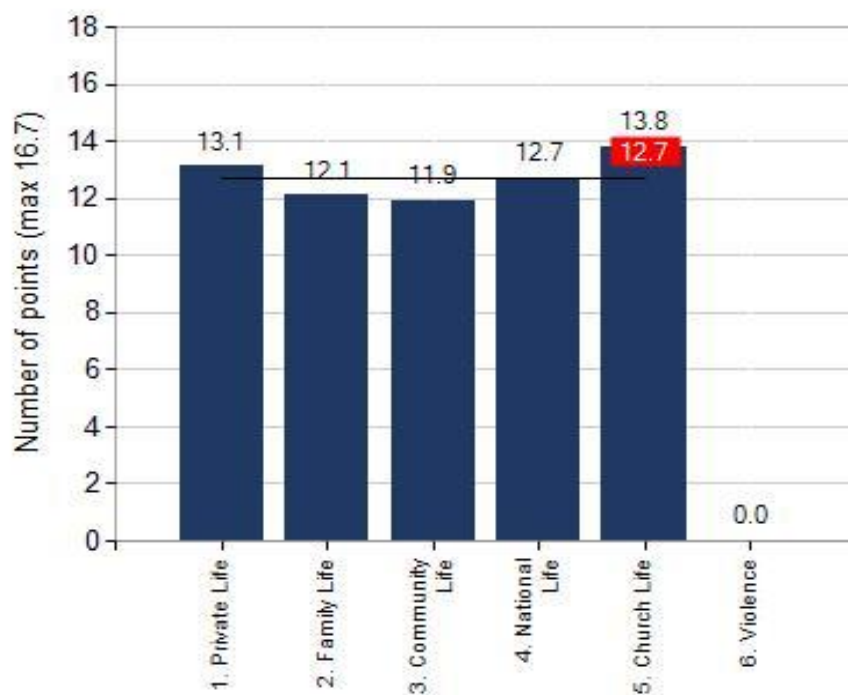
## The Persecution pattern

The WWL 2021 Persecution pattern for Bhutan shows:

- The overall pressure on Christians in Bhutan is at a very high level, with the average pressure rising from 12.2 points in WWL 2020 to 12.7 in WWL 2021.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Church* and *Private spheres of life* but is also at a very high level in the remaining three *spheres of life*. Pressure on converts is especially high in the *Private* and *Family spheres*, while all Christians face pressure in the *National* and *Church spheres*. This pressure is fuelled by the Christian minority continuing to be side-lined in everyday life and lacking official recognition.

- The score for violence against Christians remained at 0 in WWL 2021. Although no reports of incidents were relayed to observers outside the country, this should not be equated to saying that there has been no violence at all. The COVID-19 crisis increased the difficulties in obtaining reports from Bhutan.

WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern for Bhutan



## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2021 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: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

## Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

**Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.75 points)**

Conversion is banned according to Section 463 (A) of the country's Penal Code which states that conversion by means of coercion or other means of inducement is a punishable offense. 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. For converts, the pressure from family and community is arguably stronger; 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. (3.50 points)**

Christians avoid displaying Christians images when they are in public. Even churches do not display Christian symbols in public since it might provoke a negative reaction from nationalist and radical Buddhists. Christians only rarely display Christian symbols in their houses or wear them, as it increases the risk of identifying, profiling and monitoring them.

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

The aforementioned Section 463 (A) of the country's Penal Code applies to this situation as well. As all conversions are strictly opposed by family, community, religious authorities and the state, even the distribution of a simple tract (without having a discussion about the Christian faith or inviting a person to a church meeting) can be a reason for 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. (3.25 points)**

It has been reported that members of the intelligence service are known to monitor Christians and note down who attends meetings. As the pressure is always high and known Christians are monitored, Christians exercise a certain measure of self-restriction; if they meet, they do it in a discrete way and without displaying Christian symbols. If they did, it could lead to the owner of the rented house terminating their rent-contract.

## Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

**Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (4.00 points)**

The anti-conversion law can be understood in such a way that baptism is the ultimate proof of "inducement". Baptisms are therefore always done in secret, away from the eyes of the authorities and non-Christian religious leaders, only with a few witnesses and frequently at night and in remote areas.

**Block 2.5: Burials of Christians have been hindered or coercively performed with non-Christian rites. (4.00 points)**

Christian funerals are very difficult to arrange and are often impossible due to being hindered by non-Christian family members, relatives, society and the authorities. In the WWL 2021 reporting period, a Christian burial was prohibited and coercively performed with non-Christian rituals. Even burial on one's own land is not possible; it is strongly opposed by religious leaders and the community and in many cases, the deceased have to be buried in isolated locations far away from the village. If they can afford it, many Christians bury their deceased in neighboring India. Even if a burial would be allowed to take place on a private plot of land, every crisis or disaster in the village would then 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)**

Children of Christians face opposition from teachers and pupils at school and are frequently bullied. They are required to learn and to practice Buddhism, since it is a compulsory subject at secondary level school. They 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. Many schools have introduced Buddhist teachings and special classes on that subject during holidays or breaks to engage children in Buddhist values. Buddhist Lamas visits all schools and other educational institutions regularly and all students have to be present. They are supposed to bless each child by touching its head, a ceremony no-one can opt out from.

**Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.75 points)**

Children of Christians often do not want to follow their parents' faith because of the peer pressure and discrimination they experience from teachers. They try to find compromises in fear of the consequences they are facing. Children of Christians are often confused and traumatized, as per reports, because the values taught at home are so very different from the ones taught in schools and society. Since Christians cannot openly express their faith, children are often taught to think it is illegal or morally wrong to be Christian.

## 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 to them, 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.

**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)**

Especially Christians active in ministry are being monitored, which may even mean that their phone is tapped and social media use under observation. There are many incidents of Christian activity being reported to the authorities by the local community. There are rumors of the government appointing and paying local people to spy on Christians. Districts which are suspected of having a growing number of Christians came reportedly under extra scrutiny in the

WWL 2021 reporting period.

**Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)**

Most employers are biased against Christians and will bypass them when they apply for employment or promotion. As many jobs need government licenses or an NOC (see above under *Family sphere*), Christians often hide their faith in order not to jeopardize the process. Known Christians are also left out of subsidy schemes set up by the government. There have also been reports of Christians having been 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)**

Especially when Christians are reported to the authorities because of the anti-conversion law, they are called to the police station and interrogated. Even when they are acquitted afterwards, they will be closely watched by the police and by suspicious neighbors. 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 as illegal assemblies and organizers have often been summoned to speak with the police and, at times, to intelligence officers visiting churches.

## 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)**

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". 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.

**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 school, at the workplace or in wider society. Everything is interwoven with Buddhist rituals, prayers and ceremonies.



**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)**

The Commission for Religious Organisation (CRO), which is the State authority that provides registration for religious organizations, does not easily recognize non-Buddhist organizations. So far, no Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been permitted. Not only the government, but also society in general would block any attempts at establishing them.

**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.

## Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

**Block 5.2: It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government. (4.00 points)**

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, 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. At present, there is not a single Christian group which is recognized in the country. As mentioned above under the section "Recent history", in September 2019 the government stated (as part of the country's Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council) that "Religious groups are free to practice without registering". However, this statement has not translated into more freedom for Christians or other minorities.

**Block 5.7: Churches have been hindered from openly integrating converts. (4.00 points)**

Family and relatives of converts, together with the local community and the law [the oft-quoted section 463(A) of the Penal Code applies here] make it difficult for converts to be integrated in a church and this cannot be done openly.

**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 in small quantities for private use only.

**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 the government see it as a duty to protect the Buddhist history and identity of the country. As they see it, Christians willfully reject this identity. Therefore, speaking up against persecution will not be accepted. 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.

**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).*

No violent incidents were recorded. Persecution has never been particularly violent in Bhutan, since the authorities prefer to use other, less visible means. In addition, the COVID-19 crisis has meant that it has been much more difficult to obtain reports inside the country.

**5 Year trends**

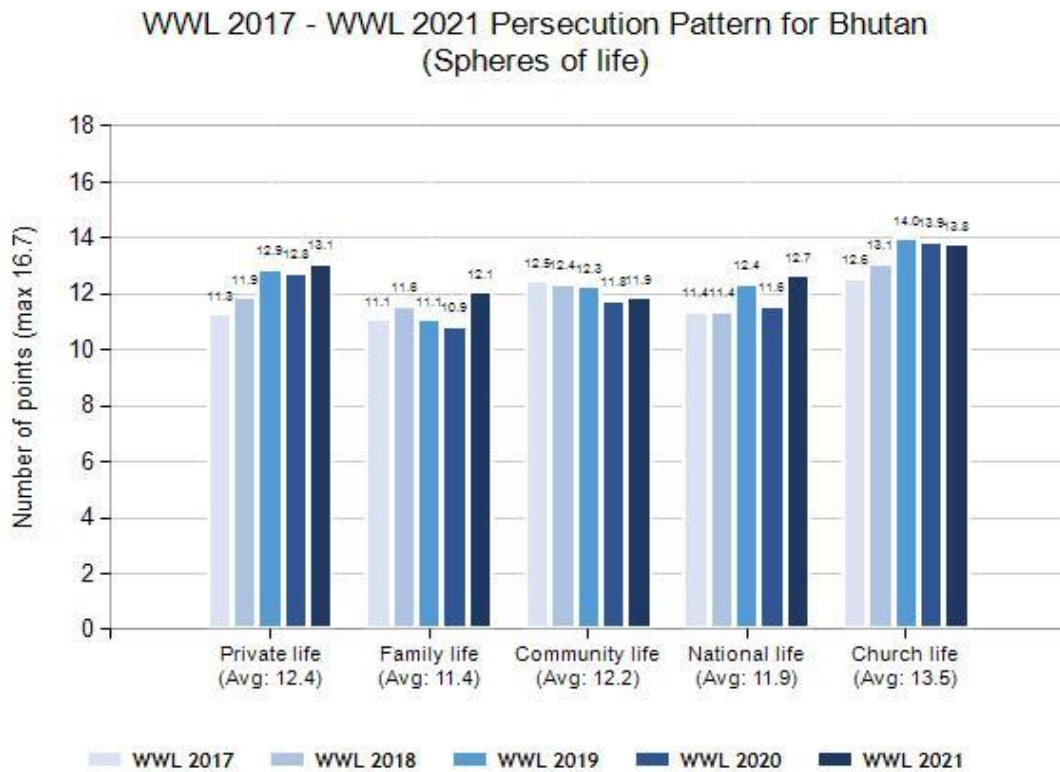
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

**5 Year trends: Average pressure**

<b>Bhutan: WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern history</b>	<b>Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life</b>
2021	12.7
2020	12.2
2019	12.5
2018	12.1
2017	11.8

Since WWL 2018, the average pressure has consistently been very high at over 12.0 points.

## 5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

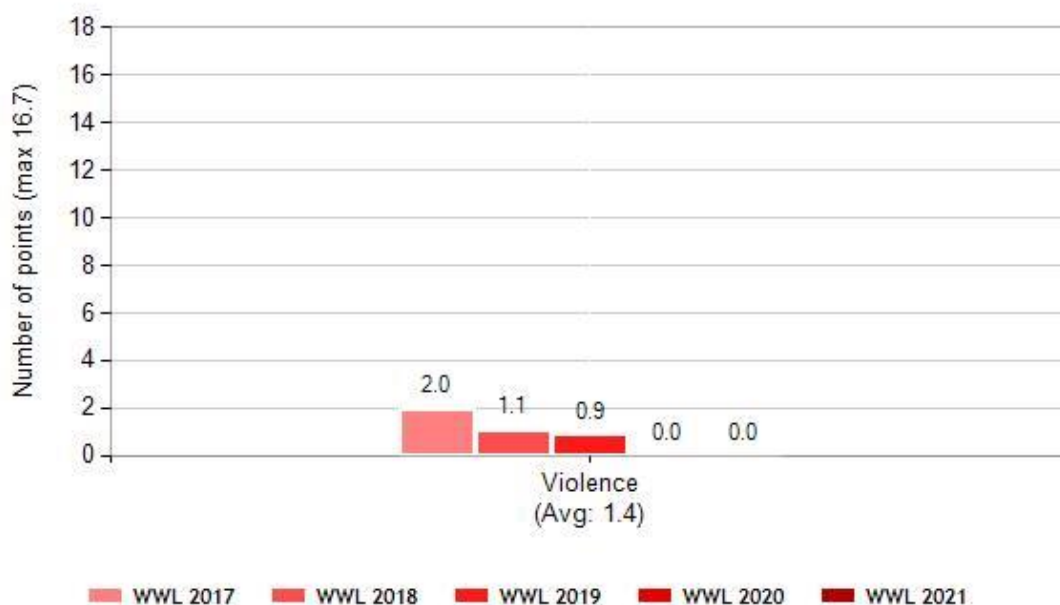


The pressure on Christians in *Church life* has on average been highest (followed by *Private life*). Scores in these *two spheres of life* increased steadily in the period WWL 2017 - WWL 2019, but appear now to have levelled off somewhat. The scores for WWL 2021 in the *Family, Community and National spheres*, would seem to be returning to levels reached in earlier years, which are still categorized as very high and reflect the fact that Christianity continues to be seen as a foreign influence which is unfitting for a Buddhist country.

## 5 Year trends: Violence against Christians

The chart below reflects the fact that persecution has never been very violent in Bhutan and the score has usually been at a very low level. The "spike" in the WWL 2017 reporting period has proved to be an exception. At the same time, the low scores reflect the fact that it is difficult to get reports on incidents out of the country.

WWL 2017 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern for Bhutan (Violence)



## Gender-specific religious persecution Female

Female Pressure Points
Forced divorce
Forced marriage
Forced out of home – expulsion
Violence – physical
Violence – psychological

At times, Bhutan has been considered an [“island of women’s entitlements in Asia”](#) (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) and men and women enjoy equal rights under the law. However, despite gender inequality that has historically favored women, in the democratic system women represent a relatively small percentage at parliament and local government levels. Bhutan also has a high rate of child marriage, with 26% of girls getting married [before the age of 18](#) (Girls Not Brides). This environment of contradictions puts a lot of family pressure on women without providing them with much independence outside the family structure.

Christian women who convert from Buddhism to Christianity are at the greatest risk of persecution, typically through being disowned by their families, or divorced by their husbands. A divorce is relatively [easy to procure](#) in Bhutan, increasing the fear among female converts that their husbands might decide to leave them (OECD, 2019, “Social Institutions and Gender Index: Bhutan”). Christian women married to non-Christians are also socially under pressure to stay with their husbands despite domestic abuse. Furthermore, whenever Christian women are married to a non-Christian and do not want to convert (e.g. to Buddhism), they often face intense pressure from their husband and/or husband's family to convert in order to avoid the shame of a divorce. For single converts, the possibility of forced marriage is a tangible threat, although no such instances have been reported in the WWL 2021 reporting period. Alternatively, they may be disowned entirely by their families and forced to leave the family home.

## Gender-specific religious persecution Male

Male Pressure Points
Denied inheritance or possessions
Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Forced out of home – expulsion
Violence – psychological

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 (Alternative report by the Tarayana Foundation for the 44th CEDAW session, 2009). In this context, Christian men and boys often experience persecution through families, being disowned by their family, asked to leave the family home, and losing inheritance. They will likely experience strong pressure from their peers and local community, compounding the sense of isolation and rejection.

They further experience pressure in the work place. When male Christians lose their job or are excluded from the traditional way of farming, the entire family is affected by the economic loss as he is typically the financial provider.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the [US State Department's IRF 2019](#) report:

"Churches that applied for registration continued to await approval from the government's Commission for Religious Organizations (CRO). As a result, there were only two registered non-Buddhist religious groups in the country, while registered Buddhist groups increased from 110 to 125. Hindu leaders cited continued support for the construction of Hindu temples, including a major project in the capital." (page 1)

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, not just by Bhutan. As one 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 as over-stayers". Numerous other ethnic groups are present in Bhutan on a much smaller scale as well, including Adivasis, Birmi, Brokpa, Doya, Lepcha, Tibetans and Toktop. As a result in part of the 'One nation, one people' policy of assimilationist policies enforcing the traditions of the dominant Drukpa Buddhist elite on all members of the Bhutanese population, many of these minorities found themselves stripped of citizenship's rights and so unable to access education, employment, health care or housing. This policy affected their rights as religious minorities as well.

## Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

### Religious nationalism - Buddhist

In a situation where Bhutan needs to show its own unique place in the region, even more so now that it has become a pawn in a bigger game between its giant neighbors India and China, it is very likely that it will do so by emphasizing its exceptional religious and cultural heritage (distinguishing itself from both neighbors). As far as civil rights are concerned, the sentencing of a journalist in August 2018 (see above in "Political and legal landscape") does not point to a more open policy. The government's statement in Geneva in September 2019 concerning the registration of religious organizations (see above in "Recent history") seems to have been more political-strategic rhetoric than representing a 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 also "Trends 3" above). 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>
- 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>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: " - <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44158477>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: island of women's entitlements in Asia - <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44158477>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: " - <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44158477>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: before the age of 18 - <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/bhutan/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: easy to procure - <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/BT.pdf>

- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: female line -  
[https://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)
- Persecution of other religious minorities: US State Department's IRF 2019 -  
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bhutan/>

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on World Watch Research's Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) and on the World Watch Monitor website:

- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Bhutan>
- <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/Bhutan>