

World
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Bangladesh: Country Dossier

January 2020



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Introduction

World Watch List 2020

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017	Total Score WWL 2016
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	92	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	94	93	89	88
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.5	9.4	92	91	91	91	87
4	Libya	15.3	15.5	15.8	16.0	16.4	11.3	90	87	86	78	79
5	Pakistan	14.0	13.9	15.0	14.9	13.7	16.7	88	87	86	88	87
6	Eritrea	14.5	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	10.9	87	86	86	82	89
7	Sudan	14.2	14.6	14.5	15.7	16.1	10.4	85	87	87	87	84
8	Yemen	16.6	16.4	16.4	16.7	16.7	2.6	85	86	85	85	78
9	Iran	14.1	14.3	14.1	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	85	85	85	83
10	India	12.9	13.0	13.5	15.0	13.5	14.8	83	83	81	73	68
11	Syria	13.5	14.2	13.0	13.9	14.4	12.6	82	82	76	86	87
12	Nigeria	12.2	11.9	13.5	12.8	13.0	16.7	80	80	77	78	78
13	Saudi Arabia	15.1	14.9	14.1	15.5	16.5	2.4	79	77	79	76	76
14	Maldives	15.4	15.6	14.0	15.9	16.6	0.7	78	78	78	76	76
15	Iraq	14.0	14.6	13.9	14.5	13.6	5.6	76	79	86	86	90
16	Egypt	12.1	13.1	10.7	13.2	10.5	16.1	76	76	70	65	64
17	Algeria	13.5	14.3	10.4	12.8	13.2	9.3	73	70	58	58	56
18	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	3.0	73	74	73	71	70
19	Myanmar	11.8	11.9	13.5	12.5	12.2	10.7	73	71	65	62	62
20	Laos	12.8	9.9	14.1	14.4	14.9	5.6	72	71	67	64	58
21	Vietnam	12.3	8.5	12.9	13.6	14.5	9.8	72	70	69	71	66
22	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.2	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.9	70	69	68	67	66
23	China	11.6	8.4	11.6	12.8	15.1	10.2	70	65	57	57	57
24	Mauritania	13.9	14.0	13.0	13.7	13.4	0.2	68	67	57	55	50
25	Central African Republic	10.1	9.1	13.1	9.8	10.2	15.6	68	70	61	58	59
26	Morocco	12.4	13.3	10.8	11.7	14.1	4.1	66	63	51	49	47
27	Qatar	13.6	13.4	10.8	12.2	14.1	2.2	66	62	63	66	65
28	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	10.2	9.4	11.8	15.6	66	48	-	-	-
29	Mali	9.2	8.2	12.8	10.0	11.7	13.7	66	68	59	59	55
30	Sri Lanka	11.5	9.0	11.0	10.9	9.6	13.1	65	58	57	55	53
31	Tajikistan	13.9	12.3	11.9	12.4	13.1	1.1	65	65	65	58	58
32	Nepal	12.4	10.8	9.9	12.1	12.2	7.0	64	64	64	53	53
33	Jordan	13.1	14.1	10.7	11.7	12.5	1.7	64	65	66	63	59
34	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.3	10.8	12.3	5.4	64	63	62	61	58
35	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	10.7	12.4	14.0	1.7	64	63	63	56	55

36	Turkey	12.6	11.8	10.7	13.3	11.3	3.7	63	66	62	57	55
37	Brunei	13.8	14.3	10.7	10.3	13.5	0.6	63	63	64	64	61
38	Bangladesh	11.1	9.9	12.7	11.1	8.9	9.3	63	58	58	63	57
39	Ethiopia	10.0	9.2	10.6	10.8	10.4	11.9	63	65	62	64	67
40	Malaysia	12.1	14.6	12.7	12.0	9.6	1.5	62	60	65	60	58
41	Colombia	8.9	7.8	11.9	9.8	8.9	15.0	62	58	56	53	55
42	Oman	12.7	13.1	10.0	11.5	12.7	2.0	62	59	57	53	53
43	Kuwait	13.2	13.1	9.9	11.5	13.4	0.7	62	60	61	57	56
44	Kenya	11.7	10.5	10.9	8.3	10.9	9.1	61	61	62	68	68
45	Bhutan	12.8	10.9	11.8	11.6	13.9	0.0	61	64	62	61	56
46	Russian Federation	12.2	8.3	10.7	10.4	12.1	6.9	60	60	51	46	48
47	United Arab Emirates	12.9	13.0	9.5	11.1	12.6	1.1	60	58	58	55	55
48	Cameroon	8.8	7.2	11.6	7.0	10.4	15.0	60	54	38	-	45
49	Indonesia	10.9	11.1	11.6	10.2	9.5	6.5	60	65	59	55	55
50	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.1	9.3	60	52	45	47	53
51	Palestinian Territories	12.2	13.0	9.2	10.2	11.9	3.1	60	57	60	64	62
52	Mexico	8.4	6.8	12.2	10.6	10.0	11.5	60	61	59	57	56
53	Azerbaijan	13.0	10.0	9.3	11.1	12.4	1.5	57	57	57	52	57
54	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.9	13.9	0.9	57	56	56	56	56
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.1	9.4	11.9	1.1	57	56	54	48	46
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.2	56	56	56	57	58
57	Democratic Republic of the Congo	5.6	6.7	10.6	7.4	10.4	15.6	56	55	33	-	53
58	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	5.9	56	48	40	-	51
59	Bahrain	12.1	12.3	9.1	10.1	10.5	0.9	55	55	57	54	54
60	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	7.0	55	52	53	59	57
61	Cuba	9.6	5.6	9.5	11.8	12.0	3.5	52	49	49	47	42
62	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	13.0	48	47	46	53	45
63	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.7	48	43	-	-	-
64	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	3.7	45	46	-	-	-
65	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.6	44	44	-	-	-
66	Mozambique	6.9	4.6	7.1	5.2	8.0	11.7	43	43	-	-	-
67	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	1.1	43	43	-	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	8.7	10.4	6.7	43	42	-	-	-
69	Venezuela	3.8	4.4	10.6	9.3	9.5	4.8	42	41	34	-	-
70	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.5	42	43	-	-	-
71	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	7.2	42	41	-	-	-
72	Nicaragua	5.8	4.2	8.5	9.8	9.0	4.1	41	41	-	-	-
73	Togo	8.6	6.7	8.5	7.1	8.4	1.1	41	42	-	-	-

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Brief note on 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 2020 reporting period was 1 November 2018 - 31 October 2019.

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).

Revised: 6 January 2020

WWL 2020: Persecution summary / Bangladesh

Brief country details

Pop 2019	Christians	Chr%
Bangladesh		
168,066,000	887,000	0.5

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

World Watch List Bangladesh	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2020	63	38
WWL 2019	58	48
WWL 2018	58	41
WWL 2017	63	26
WWL 2016	57	35

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2016-2020 reporting periods.

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Bangladesh: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Islamic oppression	Non-Christian religious leaders, One's own (extended) family, Government officials , Violent religious groups, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Political parties
Clan and ethnic antagonism	Non-Christian religious leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family, Violent religious groups, Government officials , Ethnic group leaders, Political parties
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials , Political parties
Religious nationalism	One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Non-Christian religious leaders, Violent religious groups, Government officials , Ethnic group leaders, Political parties

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of persecution situation

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 an increasing 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 from Myanmar, are facing harassment and strong pressure from their community as well.

Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period

- There have been no killings of Christians in the WWL 2020 reporting period, but several death-threats were made against members of historical churches and converts alike.
- 14 churches (or places where Christians gather) were attacked. Examples: i) In March 2019, a makeshift church and school in a Rohingya refugee camp was destroyed. ii) In April 2019, the Mohandi Assemblies of God church in the Satkhira district was burnt down. iii) Other churches in the Chittagong Hill Tracts have been destroyed as well.
- Several Christians were detained by the police in the WWL 2020 reporting period, many under the allegation of "unlawful conversion".

WWL 2020: Keys to understanding / Bangladesh

Link for general background information

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

Recent 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 were arrested and sentenced in February and October 2018. Security forces committed serious abuses including killings, “disappearances” and arbitrary arrests, with few investigations or official prosecutions being made.

The elections in December 2018 were not better: At least 17 people across the country were killed and observers reported incidents of vote-rigging, marring the results and disadvantaging the opposition. Sheikh Hasina consequently won her third consecutive term as Prime Minister and does [not need to fear](#) any control from parliament, as her party won an astonishing 96% of the vote.

Political and legal 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 have ceased, 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 Islamic groups which are growing stronger, adding to the general insecurity. Before national elections in December 2018 took place, opposition BNP politician Khaleda Zia was sentenced to an additional two years in prison on corruption charges in October 2018. In her election campaign, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina appeared to be wooing conservative Islamic circles in her speech at a gathering of madrassas in November 2018, by stating: "Anyone who pronounces offensive comments against [Islam] or against the Prophet Muhammad, will be prosecuted according to the law", and by pointing out that the [religion of the country is Islam](#).

At the same time, she stated that there is no room for Islamic militancy in Bangladesh. It remains to be seen how her government will walk this tightrope in the years to come, especially as this statement was given before an association of conservative Qawmi madrassas, whose degrees the government recognizes as being equal with a [Master's degree](#).

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. The government's decision in January 2017 to make its [school textbooks](#) more suitable for conservative Islamic groups is one sign in this respect. 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.

Just over 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.

Religious Context: Bangladesh	Numbers	%
Christians	887,000	0.5
Muslim	149,768,000	89.1
Hindu	15,427,000	9.2
Buddhist	1,063,000	0.6
Ethnoreligionist	738,000	0.4
Jewish	200	0.0
Bahai	11,700	0.0
Atheist	13,000	0.0
Agnostic	127,000	0.1
Other	31,460	0.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019). OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Economic landscape

Bangladesh is densely populated: It is the world's eighth most populous nation with over 168 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, taking the 149th of 180 places in the CPI 2018. 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. Having passed the threshold to lower-middle income status in 2014 (according to World Bank criteria) Bangladesh could become the only upper-middle income economy in South Asia by 2024. 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.

Social and cultural landscape

Despite all economic growth, income distribution is unequal and poverty is still a big problem. According to the UNDP definition of poverty related to PPP, in 2018 14.8% of the population were poor, while 21.5% remained [vulnerable](#). The literacy rate in 2018 stood at 72.8%, the unemployment rate was low, whereas the rate of vulnerable employment stood by more than 57%. The recent influx of more than 700,000 Muslim refugees from neighboring Myanmar has put the country’s economy and social fabric under enormous stress, especially in the district of Cox’s Bazar (see below).

According to World Christian Database’s estimates for 2019, just over 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” in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (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, e.g. by land-grabbing. These Christians face a double vulnerability, being tribal and Christian.

Technological landscape

According to the World Bank, the Internet Penetration Rate in Bangladesh in 2016 (the latest available numbers) stood at 18.2% and is therefore lagging behind other [South Asian countries](#). Other sources, including the government, put the number of Internet users at more than [50 %](#). In any case, Internet access is more readily available in urban areas and urbanization in Bangladesh is progressing, although the rates are lower than in some neighboring countries (in 2018, the World bank estimated a rate of [around 37%](#)). Another limitation to internet access is its affordability for the still large low-income segment of society.

Bangladesh is still rated as ["Partly Free"](#) in Freedom House’s “Freedom on the Net” report 2019, but registered a considerable decrease in freedom. Concerning the media landscape, the report states: “The online media landscape in Bangladesh is vibrant, with a number of online outlets that give voice to a range of views. Even with the increased level of censorship during the coverage period, people are able to access a variety of local and international news sources that convey independent, balanced views in the main languages spoken in the country.”

The report continues: “The ability to access localized information and create content in Bengali has contributed to the popularity of local blog hosting services.” There were shutdowns of internet services before important political events like the December 2018 elections.

According to a media report published in March 2019, the Digital Security Act (passed in October 2018) has so far enabled the authorities to [block access](#) to more than 18,000 Internet sites. While most of the blocked sites reportedly involved pornography or gambling, the law is also being used to block popular blogs such as “somewhereinblog.net”. All nine atheist bloggers killed by radical Muslims in the country in recent years were active on this website. After a public outcry, the restriction on this blog was lifted. Nevertheless, this process of blocking websites has highlighted some interesting things to note: i) It has shown what potential power lies behind this digital security law; ii) It indicates how conservative the government is becoming; iii) It has the welcome side-effect of acting as a tool for wooing Islamic groups.

Security situation

A dangerous new challenge to the Muslim-majority nation is the threat of radical Islamic violence. Police have claimed that most of the suspects behind recent attacks have been members of Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) - a banned Islamist group. In many cases, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group (IS) have taken credit for attacks and threatened more, as in a video released in [Summer 2019](#). 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. There is no clear consensus on the veracity of the claims, even amongst the region's top terror analysts. 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 has continued in 2019, although it is not always entirely clear if radical groups are being targeted or [opposition forces](#) as well. Security forces announced in September 2019 that Islamic militants have adapted their strategy, resorting to [lone wolf attacks](#), mainly targeting police posts.

An increasingly growing challenge will be the number of predominantly Muslim refugees from Myanmar. While the government initially hoped to start repatriation to neighboring Myanmar in 2019 (after the December 2018 elections), the planned repatriation of the first Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh back to Myanmar [stopped](#) before it could begin, since guaranteeing security for the returnees remains a big challenge. Repatriation has still not begun and there is a danger of a radicalization among the refugee population, especially since future perspectives for either returning to Myanmar or staying in Bangladesh look bleak for the Rohingya. The fact that the Muslim radical insurgency group, ARSA, continues to attack security forces in Myanmar (as in [April 2019](#)), will not help the repatriation process.

Trends analysis

1) Political partisanship has led to an increase of *Dictatorial paranoia and Islamic oppression*

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. The fact that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina saw it necessary before the December 2018 elections to state: "Anyone who pronounces offensive comments against [Islam] or against the Prophet Muhammad, will be prosecuted according to the law" (emphasizing that the [religion of the country is Islam](#)), was a rather discouraging message for the future of the Christian minority in Bangladesh.

When in July 2018 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 and to arrest several of the leading protesters. This highlights how tense and volatile the current situation in the country is. The fact that prominent photographer and activist Shahidul Alam was arrested in August 2018 for allegedly "false and provocative" statements on TV and Facebook (concerning the students protests) and was only [released on bail](#) in November 2018, shows that the government is nervous and on high alert.

2) The consequence for the Christian minority - a very high level of persecution

The persecution of Christians in Bangladesh is at a very high level (very high being defined in WWL methodology as scoring 61-80 points) and shows a variety of actors and Christians affected, especially converts from different religious backgrounds. The situation is particularly bad for Christian converts from a Muslim background. Since the large attack on the 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.

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

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.

External Links - WWL 2020: Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12650940>. - <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12650940>
- Recent history: not need to fear - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46718393>

- Political and legal landscape: shot dead - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/critic-of-religions-gunned-down-in-bangladesh/82551>
- Political and legal landscape: 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>
- Political and legal landscape: Master's degree - <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2018/08/13/bangladesh-readies-new-law-to-recognise-qawmi-madrasa-degrees>
- Religious landscape: school textbooks - https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/22/world/asia/bangladesh-textbooks-radical-islam.html?_r=0
- Religious landscape: ban chapters on - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/bangladesh-govt-bans-jihad-from-madrasa-texts/80639>
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WWL 2020: Church information / Bangladesh

Christian origins

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 in 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.

Church spectrum today

Church networks: Bangladesh	Christians	%
Orthodox	150	0.0
Catholic	417,000	47.0
Protestant	339,000	38.2
Independent	300,000	33.8
Unaffiliated	3,000	0.3
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-172,000	-19.4
Total	887,150	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	289,000	32.6
Renewalist movement	321,000	36.2

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

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.

WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics / Bangladesh

Reporting period

1 November 2018 – 31 October 2019

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 63 points, Bangladesh ranked 38 in WWL 2020.

This represents an increase of five points in comparison to WWL 2019 and partly reflects a situation which can only be described as tense and frightening for the Christian religious minority, even more so for the converts. The Christians among the Rohingya refugees from Myanmar in the country are being put under increasing pressure from within the camps, both from fellow refugees and from insurgency groups such as ARSA.

A further reason for the increase in score is the improved reporting from the tribal areas. Access is still limited, but more reports were obtained from Christians within the area during the WWL 2020 reporting period.

The Christian minority in general continues to face discrimination, neglect and violence as well.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Bangladesh	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Medium
Clan and ethnic antagonism	CEA	Medium
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	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.

Islamic oppression (Strong):

This persecution engine affects all Christians in Bangladesh, although the country is officially 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 the demands made 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 react by deciding 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 to the opposition party does not help bring calm to the volatile political situation.

The Myanmar-Bangladesh border region has become volatile following the sudden influx of Muslim Rohingya refugees - estimated more than 700,000 - 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, which is still one of the world's 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 growing Islamic radicalism in Bangladesh, which adds to the government's nervousness. Despite all promises, it does not seem likely that Myanmar will take back the refugees anytime soon; especially as fighting in Rakhine State in Myanmar continues (although government forces are now placing more emphasis on combatting an ethnic minority Buddhist insurgency there) and discrimination and fighting against the Muslim minority has not ceased (see Country Dossier Myanmar).

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.

Clan and ethnic antagonism (Medium):

As the Chakma, Tripura and Marma are tribal groups, *Religious nationalism* is mixed with *Clan and 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. 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) Bangladesh National Party has strengthened her Islamic ties and has begun to emphasize the country's Islamic foundations.

In the end, this coalition did not lead to any tangible results in the December 2018 election and for the time being, parliamentary opposition in Bangladesh is virtually non-existent. Although Christians and other religious minorities enjoy more freedom than in many other Muslim countries, they can easily be used as scapegoats, especially in the tense situation the country finds itself in.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of Persecution: Bangladesh	IO	RN	CEA	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	WEAK	VERY WEAK	-	MEDIUM	WEAK
Government officials	Strong	Medium	Medium	-	-	-	Strong	-
Ethnic group leaders	Weak	Medium	Medium	Very weak	Weak	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Very strong	Very strong	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	Weak	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	Strong	Strong	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Strong	Very strong	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-
One's own (extended) family	Very strong	Very strong	Very strong	Very weak	-	-	-	-
Political parties	Medium	Medium	Medium	-	-	-	Medium	Very weak
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Very weak	Very weak	Very weak	-	Very weak	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	Weak	-	-	-	-	-	-	Medium

Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
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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 Islamic oppression:

- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Very strong):** Muslim leaders in Bangladesh are often drivers of persecution targeting Christians, especially when Christian communities are seen as evangelistic or openly welcoming converts, as this is often perceived as threatening the Muslim majority.
- **Extended family (Very strong):** For families, it is often hard to accept that their relatives - frequently children - have left Islam to follow the Christian faith. In their eyes, this publicly dishonors the family within society and therefore, in many cases, families cut all ties with converts.
- **Violent religious groups (Strong):** Local radical Islamic groups, specifically Jamaatul Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB), Jamaat-e-Islami, Hefazat-e-Islami, and Ahle Sunnat are actively targeting the Christian minority, singling out converts. A notable trend is the rise of IS attacks in the country, targeting primarily free thinkers and minority religious groups including Christians (especially leaders and evangelists) and converts.
- **Government officials (Strong):** Government officials are drivers of *Islamic oppression* often combined with *Dictatorial paranoia*, since they are serving the ruling government. Especially in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, government officials act harshly against Christians and treat them unfairly, for example when land issues are concerned. The army treats ethnic minorities in this region with very high suspicion as well.
- **Normal citizens (Strong):** Although incidents of mob violence against Christians has decreased over the last months, normal citizens still perceive conversion to Christianity as something which is socially undesirable and places an individual outside society. Therefore, citizens, especially in rural areas, ostracize converts. Members of ethnic minorities, many of them Christian, are watched with suspicion as well.
- **Political parties (Medium):** In an effort to consolidate and if possible increase power, political parties have wooed radical Islamic groups by putting pressure on Christians as well as by stressing the special status of Islam. Local political leaders are often involved in land issues, which affect the Christian minority. 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.

Drivers of Religious nationalism blended with Clan and ethnic antagonism:

- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Very strong):** Buddhist and Hindu religious leaders are driving persecution against converts from their religious background. As their groups are in a minority position in Bangladesh anyway, the conversion of people out of their group feels like an even further weakening. Thus they call for converts to be placed under considerable pressure to give up their new faith.
- **Extended family (Very strong):** What has been stated above for religious leaders is even more strongly the case for a convert's own family. Here, conversion is often identified with shaming the reputation and dignity of the family in the local rural society. Therefore, the family will put a lot of pressure on converts to bring them back and may even expel them from the village, if this does not succeed.
- **Normal citizens (Very strong):** In the closely-knit minority societies in the Chittagong Hill Tracts it is not just the family putting pressure on converts. The very act of conversion is seen as putting oneself outside society and weakening the whole religious group. Encouraged by religious leaders, neighbors and friends put pressure on the converts to recant.
- **Violent religious groups (Strong):** In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, violent religious groups like Jana Sanghati Samity (JSS) exist. They frequently threaten pastors and church leaders who are active in the area.
- **Ethnic group leaders (Medium):** Often, ethnic group leaders put pressure on those putting themselves outside society to come back and rejoin the minority's fight for survival. For this, however, they need to share identity, of which religion is an important part.
- **Political parties (Medium):** Ethnic group leaders are often political leaders as well, so they will use (local) politics as well to put pressure on the Christians.
- **Government officials (Medium):** Apart from what was already said under *Islamic oppression*, local government officials make Christian's lives difficult by getting actively involved in land issues or by staying passive when it comes to investigating attacks against Christians, thereby discouraging the minority.
- **Organized Crime (Medium):** Churches and homes of Christians, especially from the ethnic minorities, have been attacked and destroyed by elements connected to the land-grabbing mafia. These are usually local strongmen, often with good connections to local and sometimes even national politicians.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

- **Government officials (Strong):** As already stated, it has become clear over the last years that the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has tightened its grip on power. Whoever is seen as a threat, will be targeted. Even though Christians are widely regarded as being government supporters, as a minority they easily become a target or are used as scapegoats.
- **Political parties (Medium):** While the ruling Awami League (AL) will do everything to stay in power, the opposition Bangladesh National Party tends to blame Christians who they consider are allied with AL and the government. In this tense political climate, parties may not act against Christians themselves, but may give tacit approval or support for vigilante and violent groups connected with them.

Geographical hotspots of persecution

Bangladesh's northern region with the Chittagong Hill Tracts and its many ethnic minorities is a much overlooked hotspot for persecution against Christians at the hands of both the Muslim majority and the Buddhist minority. In the last three years, another hotspot developed when Bangladesh became host to more than 700,000 Islamic refugees from neighboring Myanmar. Bangladesh struggles to take care of them, even with the help of the international community. As repatriation efforts have been constantly stalled, the longer the refugees have to stay in camps, the higher the risk is that some will be prone to Islamic radicalization, affecting Bangladesh as well. The camps have also become a place where a tiny minority of Rohingya converts lives, facing increasing pressure without having options to turn to or to escape.

Christian communities and how they are affected

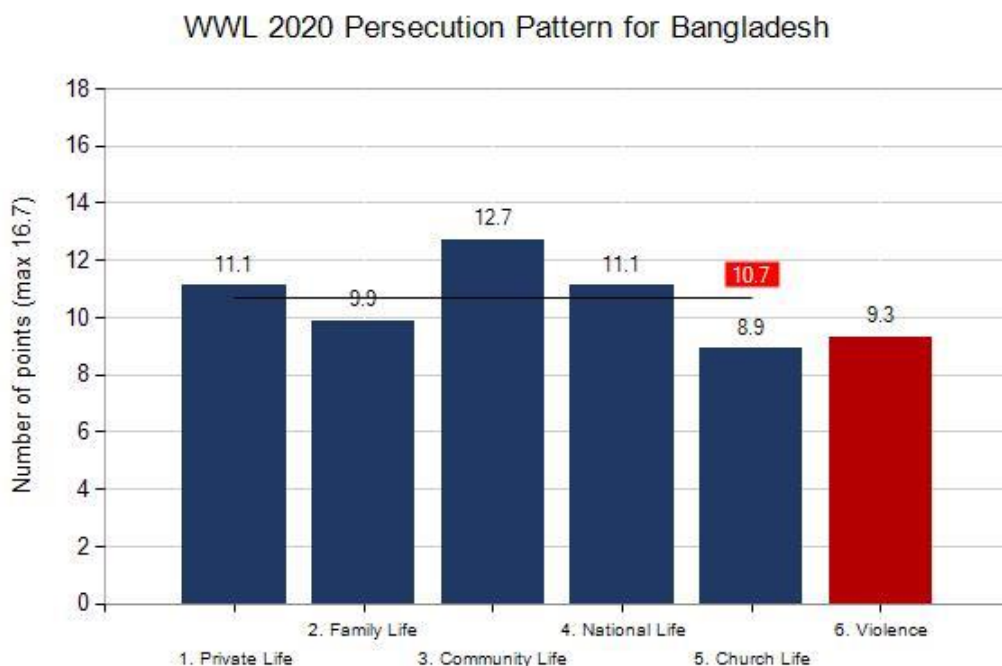
Communities of expatriate Christians: This group includes embassy personnel and foreign workers from the important textile sector. They face being observed and threatened by Islamic militants.

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.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2020 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 10.0 in WWL 2019 to 10.7 in WWL 2020. This reflects rising pressure on all Christians, but especially on converts to Christianity. The increasingly difficult situation of such converts among the Rohingya refugees who fled Myanmar in 2017 has added to an increase in scores.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Community* and *Private spheres*, where converts are particularly affected, but all Christians face pressure in the *National* and *Church spheres*.
- Violence against Christians increased from 7.8 points in WWL 2019 to 9.3 points in WWL 2020. There were no killings, but more attacks against churches and more arrests were reported than in the WWL 2019 reporting period.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, details are shown from four of the highest scoring block questions, with those items scoring highest listed first. 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 0 – 4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom.

Private sphere:

- ***It has been risky for Christians to discuss their faith with those other than immediate family members (Block 1.8 / 3.25 points):*** Given the pressure on converts as well as on those who actively invite others to follow the Christian faith, most converts prefer to stay as invisible as possible in order not to make themselves targets. With the growth of radical Islamic influence, more Christians now prefer to keep a low profile and avoid contact with anyone outside their own group.
- ***It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (Block 1.4 / Score: 3 points):*** Converts live in fear and often prefer to keep their conversion a secret from their family. Those who choose to identify themselves are regularly threatened and are forced to remove their blogs and Facebook page. Under the "Digital Security Act", adopted in October 2018, defamation, hurting religious sentiments, causing deterioration of law and order, and instigating against any person or organization through publishing or transmitting any material in websites or in electronic form can lead to a maximum 14 year prison sentence.
- ***Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable (Block 1.1 / Score: 3 points):*** From a legal standpoint, the conversion process seems to be very simple: The law provides that the convert goes to a lawyer presenting a written signed document, which states he or she changed religion for personal reasons, under no pressure and of their own free will. For any Christian, Buddhist or Hindu who wishes to become a Muslim, this procedure is almost a formality. In contrast, for a Muslim to become a Christian, it is normal to encounter pressure from the lawyer, who sometimes even refuses (illegally) to register the conversion. As Islam is the state religion and the religion of the vast majority, Muslims who convert to Christianity face strong societal and family pressure in addition to such legal issues.

- ***It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols (Block 1.5 / Score: 2.75 points):*** Converts and Rohingya Christians cannot have any Christian images or symbols visible because it is too risky for their safety. One pastor was severely beaten when Christian images were discovered in his possession. Particularly in rural areas, Christians are cautious and tend to avoid visibility because of fear of attack.

Although the Constitution guarantees the freedom to profess any religion, Christians live with limited freedom. People seen as converting or proselytizing can be detained and accused of criminal offences. 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. Christians who are not converts have more freedom in their private lives, however.

Family sphere:

- ***Christian children have been pressed to attend anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education (Block 2.8 / Score: 3.5 points):*** There is a bias towards Islamic religious education in state schools which is not just apparent in law but also in practice, since there are many more options for Islamic religious education compared to non-Islamic religious education. In many cases, school teachers are simply not teaching Christianity, so that parents have to educate them at home. Children of converts sometimes experience that their parent's conversion is not accepted and they have to attend Islamic classes. In many cases, Christian children are forced to study non-Christian teachings and use Islamic textbooks at school.
- ***Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith (Block 2.9 / Score: 3.25 points):*** Children of converts are often scolded by teachers and even by the headmasters, who put pressure on children and parents alike to return to Islam. Many children therefore try to avoid school as it is hard to stand the pressure. Sometimes, children are threatened, but often they are promised material and other benefits for them and their family if they return to Islam. Seeing their teachers as a role model, fellow pupils frequently mock Christian schoolchildren, which can reach the point where the latter refuse to go to school or leave the house at all.
- ***Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs (Block 2.7 / Score: 3 points):*** This is especially a problem which is faced by converts. If the children are forced to continue attending Islamic classes and use Islamic textbooks, this interferes with the parents' rights of raising their children according to their beliefs. But frequently, pressure and interference from the wider family is even stronger, so that uncles, aunts or grandparents try to influence and derail the parents' efforts.
- ***Christian baptisms have been hindered (Block 2.4 / Score: 2.75 points):*** Villagers are known to disturb and hinder baptisms and some church leaders refuse to baptize converts from a Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim background in local churches for fear of reprisals. Converts are usually sent to other cities or areas to be baptized.

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 Christian wedding or a funeral can be difficult or even impossible for converts. Converts are often isolated from their families and may even be forced to leave their homes.

Community sphere:

- **Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (Block 3.2 / Score: 3.5 points):** Christians, especially converts have been monitored by local leaders, as well as by vigilante and violent groups. There were cases, where local imams organized demonstrations against Christians and incited crowds during Friday prayers. Where Christian meetings are considered too big or are seen as proselytizing, locals have called in the police to interrogate the Christian leaders involved.
- **Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local police for faith-related reasons (Block 3.13 / Score: 3.5 points):** In cases of (suspected) conversion, Christians have been interrogated by the police and/or vigilante groups and threatened. In one case, a mob of local Muslims took 45 convert families to the mosque and forced them to do 'towba' (repent and deny Christ). Religious leaders from the mosque also fined each family 100 taka for converting to the Christian faith. Local police are interested in keeping the peace and will therefore give in to the demands of the Muslim majority.
- **Christians faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (Block 3.9 / Score: 3.5 points):** Christians from a variety of backgrounds are facing disadvantages in their education. Few Christians get the chance to attend BA or MA degree courses at a college or university. Although there are government rules and even quotas for disadvantaged communities and minorities, Christians often face either a simple denial of admission or are required to pay fees, even though education should be free according to government legislation.
- **Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons (Block 3.10 / Score: 3.5 points):** Due to their low social status, it is already more difficult for Christians to find work than Muslims. Often, when they finally manage to be invited to a job interview, they discover that the questions are less about their skills and more about their faith. This is particularly experienced by converts. And if Christians do gain employment, frequently they will not be promoted or given benefits coming with the job. Although some Christians have made it into high positions in the country, in general, they are disadvantaged by the country's civil service [quota system](#).

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.

National sphere:

- **Christians have been hindered in travelling for faith-related reasons (Block 4.4 / Score: 3.5 points):** All visitors to any village in Chittagong Hill Tracts must register with the military authorities. In registering, they have to provide the purpose for their visit. If it is for religious purposes, permission will not be granted. This affects all Christians in this region.
- **Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered or forbidden (Block 4.9 / Score: 3.5 points):** Non-Muslim religious bodies are not required to register with the government; however, all non-governmental organizations (NGOs) including religious ones are required to register with the government's NGO Affairs Bureau if they received foreign financial assistance for social development projects.

In November 2017, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina instructed the authorities to monitor NGO activities in Bangladesh. The NGO Affairs Bureau regularly monitors foreign-funded NGO activities. This Foreign Donations (Voluntarily Donations) Regulation Bill has effectively closed many Christian NGOs, especially smaller ones. It has also made operations for the remaining NGOs more complicated.

- **Those who caused harm to Christians deliberately have been left unpunished (Block 4.14 / Score: 3.5 points):** In almost all cases where Christians are the victims of an incident, no perpetrators are found or punished. This is even true when it is about violent attacks (such as burning down a pastor's house, as occurred in the WWL 2020 reporting period). In other cases where Christians have been attacked, they have faced a high degree of unwillingness by the authorities to even start proper investigations.
- **Christians, churches or Christian organizations have been hindered in publicly displaying religious symbols (Block 4.12 / Score: 3.25 points):** Many mission schools have removed the cross and other Christian symbols to avoid offending the 'sensitivities' of local Muslims; churches in certain areas avoid showing these symbols prominently as well. Converts in their congregations do not use visible Christian symbols.

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 are frequently slandered, especially in rural areas. An example is the incident in April 2019, when an imam issued a fatwa, saying: "If you kill one Christian, you will receive blessings equal to 100 Islamic religious martyrs". Such statements encourage people to attack Christians, especially converts. 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. There have been cases where converts to Christianity were not admitted to military service. Others have faced problems in changing their national identity card (NID) after their conversion. As their name is still Muslim, officers reject any application for change.

Church sphere:

- **Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials has been monitored (Block 5.8 / Score: 4 points):** The monitoring is not usually carried out by the state, but by local radical Islamic groups or by the wider society, which may also take the law into its own hand by interrogating and punishing Christians. As Christians are suspected of missionary work, the monitoring is widespread, whereas its intensity depends on how active the churches are.
- **Churches have been hindered from openly integrating converts (Block 5.7 / Score: 3.75 points):** As stated above, many pastors and church leaders refuse to baptize converted Muslims for fear of reprisals. Converts are advised to travel to a different part of the country to get baptized. But even then, they cannot be openly integrated into the church as converts. Once their status is known, they and the church will face trouble.
- **Activities of churches have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed (Block 5.1 / Score: 3.5 points):** Christians have reported that they are being monitored especially in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and in areas where they are suspected of evangelism among Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. In these areas, the vigilante groups and authorities apparently receive names and details of all participants and key leaders of churches through informers.

- **Pastors or other Christian leaders, or their family members, have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons (Block 5.11 / Score 3.25):** For the past few years, home-grown Islamic militant groups have been growing all over the country. The Christian minority is targeted since their missionary zeal is perceived as being dangerous. Targets for harassment and intimidation are pastors and church leaders, especially among the convert community.

In general, churches are able to function but the limitations are growing and it is reported that training has become more difficult. 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. While work among youth has not been forbidden, the conversion of minors is punished and generally seen as unethical. In the reporting period, a Christian pastor has been arrested, released on bail, but facing a trial for it.

Violence

The following table is based on reported cases as much as possible. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given. (A symbolic number of 10 could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100 could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1000 could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain.) In cases where it is clear that (many) more Christians are affected, but a concrete number could be given according to the number of incidents reported, the number given has to be understood as being an absolutely minimum figure.

Bangladesh	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2020	01 Nov 2018 - 31 Oct 2019	0	114	27	14	58
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.

For the WWL 2020 reporting period:

- **Christians killed:** There were no reports of Christians being killed for their faith in the WWL 2020 reporting period.
- **Christians attacked:** As an example, on 13 November 2018, four Christian converts were attacked and severely beaten by a crowd in Jobarpar, Barisal. In 2019, there were been many more attacks, especially targeted at, but not limited to, converts. A further example was [reported](#) by La Croix International on 9 May 2019.
- **Christians arrested:** There are reports of at least 27 Christians who were detained or arrested and imprisoned. Details on this cannot be published for security reasons.
- **Churches attacked:** At least 14 churches (or places where Christians gather) were attacked, mainly by members of local communities. See "Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period" above.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** Christian homes have been attacked in a variety of places, many by community members, some by land-grabbers. Some reports involved the Khagrachari and Kurigram districts. No details can be given for security reasons.

5 Year trends

The following three charts show the scores for pressure and violence targeting Christians over the last five reporting periods.

Chart 1:

In the first four reporting periods, the average pressure on Christians reached a more or less constant level in the range of 9.5 - 10.2 points shown. However, WWL 2020 saw a considerable increase to 10.7 points.

WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern history: Bangladesh	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2020	10.7
2019	10.0
2018	9.5
2017	10.2
2016	9.8

Chart 2:

The levels of pressure in all spheres of life (and in violence) 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. Following this spike, the pressure on Christians gradually increased again over all spheres of life, partly due to the influx of Rohingya refugees in 2017 and the increased pressure reported on the Christian converts among them.

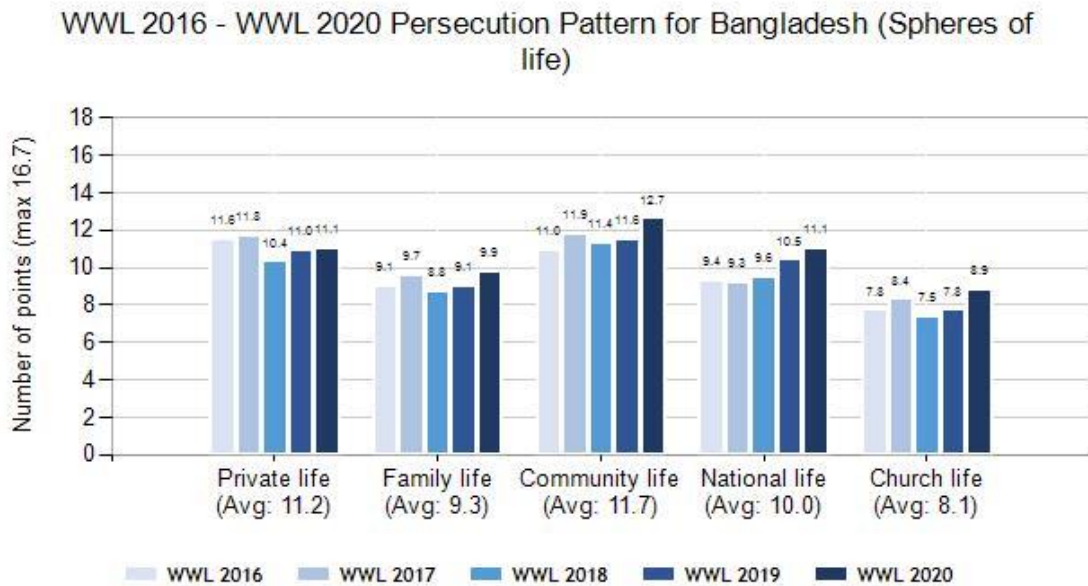
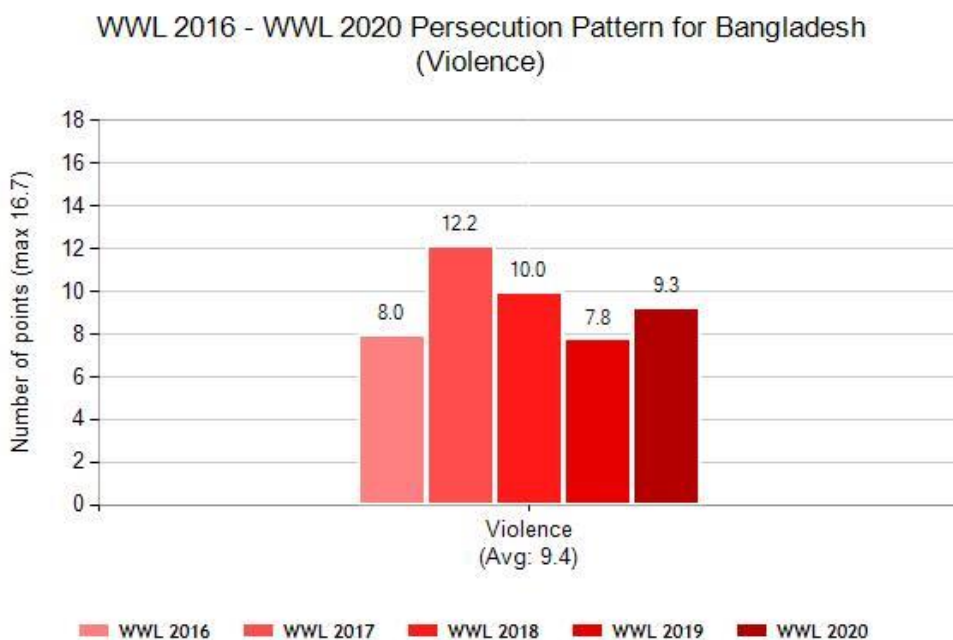


Chart 3:

Having spiked in WWL 2017, the level of violence then decreased in the next two reporting periods reflecting the fact that the authorities began to act decisively against violent Islamic militants. However, WWL 2020 saw an increase in the level of violence again.



Gender profile of persecution

Female Pressure Points:

- ***Abduction***
- ***Discrimination/Harassment via education***
- ***Economic harassment via fines***
- ***Economic harassment via work/job/business***
- ***Forced divorce***
- ***Forced marriage***
- ***Violence – death***
- ***Violence – psychological***
- ***Violence – sexual***

Bangladesh is culturally class-based and patriarchal. Despite the country being led by female politicians for many years, Bangladesh is still a country where it is normally dangerous and difficult to be a woman. According to a report published to mark 'Child Rights Week 2018' in Dhaka, more than half of the girls in the country were married by their 18th birthdays in 2017. Although the overall child marriage rate in Bangladesh has declined and altered in structure in recent decades, the rate of child marriage continues to be highest in the world.

In this context, women and girls are most vulnerable to persecution from their nuclear family, extended family, friends, neighbors and local community. Because women and girls are mostly dependent on males, sexual assault, rape and forced marriage are common forms of religious persecution. They are not only abused physically, but also mentally.

Women and girls are also prone to discrimination at the workplace and in schools. Reports of rapes and sexual harassment, even in government schools, are [increasingly common](#), although this is underreported due to social stigma.

The US State Department's 2018 International Religious Freedom Report states that, despite longstanding government orders to the contrary, village community leaders (often together with local religious leaders) continued to use extrajudicial fatwas to punish individuals, mostly women, for perceived "moral transgressions," such as adultery and other illicit sexual relations.

On the other hand, more and more women are being empowered to join the workforce and are therefore gradually gaining more independence. In addition, even in a country with very complicated marital laws, some progress is being made in ensuring more protection for women of all religions. Muslims, Hindus and Christians all have separate laws on marriage, separation and divorce.

Male Pressure Points:

- ***Denied access to social community/networks***
- ***Denied custody of children***
- ***Denied inheritance or possessions***
- ***False charges***
- ***Incarceration by government***

- **Violence – physical**
- **Violence – psychological**

One result of the patriarchal cultural norms in Bangladesh is that males generally become Christians first, followed by their families later. As leaders within their families, men and boys are often face persecution first. Additionally, Christian spouses of non-Christians are excluded from claiming custody of any children, resulting in the separation of Christian men from their children.

Men and boys are particularly subject to all sorts of physical violence, torture, false accusations and arrest for reasons of faith. Violence comes in many forms, such as being beaten, being threatened with death, finding their house and property demolished or confiscated, as well as being jailed, separated, monitored, abused, and harassed by local and national government officials.

As men are the main breadwinners, 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.

Persecution of other religious minorities

All religious minorities are prone to discrimination and violence, this includes Islamic minority groups like Shiite and Ahmadi as well as Hindu and Buddhist minorities. There have been - still unheeded - calls to [declare the Ahmadi minority non-Muslim](#). Hindus are the second largest religious group in the country behind Sunni Muslims. Hindus are subject to discrimination 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 displacement.

One country expert explained about the situation for 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. When one Hindu activist told US President Donald Trump about the situation of religious minorities and spoke of "[persecution](#)" during the Ministerial for Religious Freedom in July 2019 in Washington, she sparked outrage at home and was seen as tarnishing the image of Bangladesh.

Future outlook for the church

The outlook for Christians as 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 converts in particular are likely to be vulnerable to attack. The fact that the government is both fighting Islamic militancy and wooing 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 also targeted by radical Muslims because they are seen as being allied with the government (due to their preference of retaining secularism as set out in 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 sizable 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.
- **Clan and ethnic antagonism:** What has been stated above concerning Religious nationalism applies to this Persecution engine as well as they are blended.
- **Dictatorial paranoia:** Elections on 30 December 2018 saw a landslide victory for Sheikh Hasina's Awami League and made her the longest ruling prime minister in Bangladesh's history. The fact that the opposition (and international observers) doubted the fairness of elections points to a continuation of the Persecution engine *Dictatorial paranoia*. Christians as a minority may find themselves in the crosshairs of political infighting. In former Chief Justice Surendra Kumar Sinha's 2018 publication entitled „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. He is now prosecuted in Bangladesh for alleged corruption and claimed [political asylum](#) in Canada in July 2019. This Persecution engine seems therefore here to stay, no matter if the claims hold some truth or not: Whoever is perceived as a threat by the rulers, will be targeted, no matter how high his position.

External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines: ban chapters on jihad - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/bangladesh-govt-bans-jihad-from-madrassa-texts/80639>
- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life : quota system - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/bangladeshs-unfair-civil-service-quota-system-under-fire/81722>

- Violence: reported - https://international.la-croix.com/news/churchgoers-cowed-by-islamist-bullies-in-bangladesh/10066?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=09-05-2019&utm_campaign=newsletter_crx_lci&PMID=58d1f792a26689dfa2699c74ec4d75ae
- Gender profile of persecution: increasingly common - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Bangladesh,-tribal-Catholics-molested-and-raped.-The-attackers-remain-unpunished-45450.html>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: declare the Ahmadi minority non-Muslim - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/cleric-demands-bangladesh-ahmadis-be-declared-non-muslim/85004>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: "persecution" - <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/down-and-out-dhaka>
- Future outlook for the church: madrassa system - <http://southasiamonitor.org/detail.php?type=sl&nid=18564>
- Future outlook for the church: intimidated and influenced judges - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/former-chief-justices-book-causes-furore-in-bangladesh/83456>
- Future outlook for the church: political asylum - <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/Bangladesh-politics-07262019175417.html>

Additional reports and articles

WWR in-depth reports

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

At the time of publication there were no items specifically for Bangladesh.

World Watch Monitor news articles

Articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/bangladesh>.

Recent country developments

Up-to-date articles are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Bangladesh>
(password: freedom).