

WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

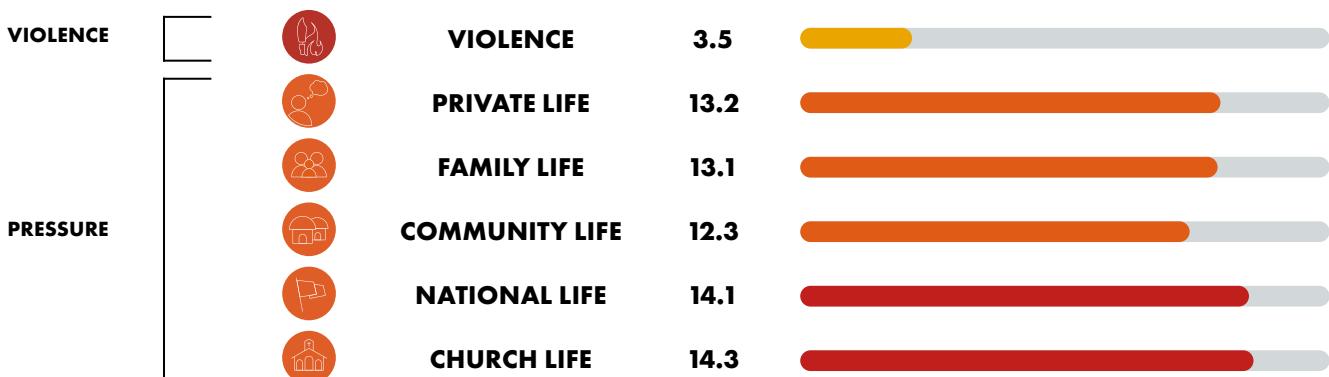
WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
34

BHUTAN



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LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points ($6 \times 16.7 = 100$).

Key findings

All Bhutanese citizens are expected to follow Buddhism. Converts to Christianity will be watched with suspicion, and efforts are usually made by family and community to bring them back to their former religion. Besides converts, many Christians come from the Nepalese minority and live in the south. No churches have official state recognition, which means that Christians are technically worshiping illegally. For day-to-day life, all citizens need a document referred to as a “Non-Objection Certificate” (NOC) which is issued by village authorities to confirm that the individual in question is a good citizen and has caused no problems in the village. This certificate is needed for loan applications, registering property, applying for jobs, and the renewal of ID cards. For Christians who do not have Bhutanese citizenship, the NOC is impossible to obtain. Sometimes, Christians are threatened with being deleted from the census records, as the census form requires citizens to indicate their religious affiliation. They are isolated and ridiculed on social media platforms.

Quick facts

LEADER

King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck

POPULATION

797,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

19,300¹

MAIN RELIGION

Buddhism

GOVERNMENT

Constitutional Monarchy



Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	19,300	2.4
Buddhists	659,000	82.7
Hindus	90,300	11.3
Others	28,400	3.6
	Total	100%

Source²

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. The king is young, popular and regarded as the guardian of Buddhism. Under the National Security Act 1992, it is treason to speak against the king, people or country, and anyone guilty can be jailed.

The Constitution states that Mahayana Buddhism is protected as the nation's "spiritual heritage" and all religious institutions have a constitutional duty to promote this heritage. In May 2011, the government inserted an anti-conversion clause into the Penal Code in order to fulfill Article 7(4) of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan that states: "A Bhutanese citizen shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. No person shall be compelled to belong

to another faith by means of coercion or inducement". Notably, the terms "coercion" and "other means of inducement" are not clearly defined in the Penal Code; this gives the authorities and ethnic and religious leaders leverage to put pressure on converts. Section 463 (A) of the Penal Code (Amendment) Act of Bhutan 2011 states: "A defendant shall be guilty of the offense of compelling others to belong to another faith if the defendant used coercion or other forms of inducement to cause the conversion of a person from one religion or faith to another". Section 463 (B) adds: "The offense of compelling others to belong to another faith shall be a misdemeanor", which is punishable by a sentence of up to three years in prison.

The government announced at the country's Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council in 2019 and again in 2024 that registration is not a prerequisite for religious meetings ([UNHRC, A/HRC/58/9, 18 December 2024, pp.9-10, #98](#)). However, no changes have been introduced for Christians. Minorities are able to vote and stand for elections, but the voice of religious minorities is given little attention in society and government.

Bhutan borders the two most populous countries in the world, China and India. China's claims over Bhutanese territory have increased in recent years ([Jamestown Foundation, 2 February 2024](#)).

¹ Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

² Other refers to all the rest to make up 100%: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM – BUDDHIST

Though technically a secular state, Bhutan's spiritual heritage is Mahayana Buddhism. According to the Constitution, "It is the responsibility of all religious institutions and personalities to promote the spiritual heritage of the country." As a result, no Christian congregation has been allowed to build a church structure. Especially in rural areas, Buddhist monks oppose the presence of Christians, putting pressure on them to reconvert. Officials tend to side with the monks and are willing to do whatever is necessary to preserve the Buddhist social fabric. Society is close-knit, and any deviation is perceived as disturbing the harmony, so family and community also put pressure on converts.



How the situation varies by region

There are no hotspots where more violations are experienced. Throughout the country, no Christian groups are allowed to worship publicly, own property, raise funds, conduct outreach activities or import literature.

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

There are very few expatriate Christians, and they are not able to join the existing house churches.

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

The small number of Roman Catholics (1,400 according to WCD, accessed April 2025) are tolerated, but the Roman Catholic Church lacks official recognition and is subject to discrimination.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Converts from a Buddhist, Hindu or ethnic background face discrimination as well as strong pressure from family and community to return to Buddhism, Hinduism or the traditional Bön faith.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

These include Evangelical and Pentecostal communities. They are closely monitored by the authorities and local community; raids and arrests occasionally occur. In January 2025, a Christian gathering in a southern village was briefly disrupted by local residents questioning its legality.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Although Bhutanese society is traditionally matriarchal, Christian women face significant family and community pressure. Converts from Buddhism or Hinduism risk divorce or disownment, since divorce is easily obtained and polygamy allows husbands to take another wife. Christian women married to non-Christians are pressured to remain, even in cases of domestic abuse, or to adopt their husband's faith. Forced marriage also remains a tangible threat: in 2024, a young convert was compelled to marry a Hindu man and forced into his religious practices, restricting her Christian life.

Female typical pressure points:

- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

MEN

In Bhutan's matriarchal society, Christian men may be disowned, expelled from their homes and denied inheritance, deepening their vulnerability. Converts are often rejected by peers and communities, compounding their sense of isolation. Male believers often face workplace discrimination in urban areas and exclusion from rural farming, depriving their families of vital income. Public hostility and harassment are also common if their faith is discovered. Male church leaders face additional pressure, with reports of detentions, leaving Christian men particularly exposed as providers and spiritual leaders.

Male typical pressure points:

- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Violence – psychological



WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	34	71
2025	36	69
2024	36	68
2023	40	66
2022	34	67

The overall score rose by 1.3 points. This was primarily due to the violence score rising from 2.2 points in WWL 2025 to 3.5 points that included a greater number of house church closures and arrests. The Christian minority continues to be sidelined in everyday life and lack official recognition. Converts are not recognized in society and are therefore regularly shunned by fellow citizens and often denied official documents by the authorities. Children of Christians also often experience discrimination at school.

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Examples of violence in the reporting period

For security reasons, no details can be published here.



PRIVATE LIFE

All conversions face strict opposition from family, community, religious authorities and the state. Even distributing Christian leaflets can lead to arrest. Section 463 (A) of the Penal Code criminalizes conversion through “coercion” or “inducement”, terms left undefined, enabling authorities to use anti-conversion legislation broadly. Converts hide their faith and meet discreetly. Christians and churches avoid displaying Christian images to prevent negative reactions from nationalist and radical Buddhists.

FAMILY LIFE

Christian children face pressure and discrimination from teachers and classmates. They must learn Buddhism and participate in rituals, including bowing to shrines. Christian funerals are often prevented by non-Christian family members, society and authorities. Deceased Christians are typically buried in neighboring India due to strong opposition. Baptisms, viewed as proof of conversion by “inducement,” are conducted secretly.

COMMUNITY LIFE

Christians must participate in Buddhist activities, especially in villages, or face harassment. Local communities closely monitor Christians and report suspicious activity to authorities, leading to

phone and social media surveillance. Christians accused under anti-conversion law face police interrogation. At workplaces, known Christians may be dismissed or denied employment opportunities and government subsidies. Because of this, most Christians hide their faith.

NATIONAL LIFE

The Constitution protects Mahayana Buddhism as the nation’s “spiritual heritage”. Despite constitutional guarantees of religious freedom, Section 463 (A) criminalizes compelling others to convert through “coercion or other forms of inducement,” punishable by up to three years of imprisonment. The Commission for Religious Organization (CRO) has not recognized any Christian civil society organizations or political parties.

CHURCH LIFE

Registration remains the biggest challenge for churches, as unregistered churches are technically illegal, and meetings are often disrupted by local residents or questioned by local authorities. Christian groups seeking CRO registration receive no response. Bibles and Christian materials cannot be produced in Bhutan and importing them is prohibited except in small quantities for private use only.



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International obligations & rights violated

Bhutan has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under the following international treaties:

1. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women ([CEDAW](#))
2. Convention on the Rights of the Child ([CRC](#))

Bhutan is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christian children are forced to receive Buddhist religious education and to participate in religious ceremonies and festivals that are not in line with their religious beliefs (CRC Art)
- Group 4957, Grouped object Christian female converts run the risk of being forcibly married to non-Christian men (CEDAW Art. 16)

Situation of other religious minorities

Lhotshampas are of Nepalese descent and a mostly Hindu group. Although comprising an estimated 33% of the population, they have been victims of severe discrimination in recent decades ([World Atlas, accessed 9 July 2025](#)).

Government ceremonies are reported to involve mandatory Buddhist prayer rituals, according to the [US State Department, IRFR 2023 Bhutan](#).



Open Doors in Bhutan

Open Doors local partners provide immediate aid to Bhutanese believers when their faith in Christ leads to various kinds of persecution. We strengthen the persecuted church in Bhutan primarily through prayer support and other practical emergency support.



ABOUT THIS DOSSIER

- The content of this Country Dossier is based on detailed analysis carried out by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. This dossier may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2026 Open Doors International.
- All 50 Country Dossiers – along with the latest update of WWL Methodology – can be accessed [here](#).
- The WWL 2026 reporting period was 01 October 2024 - 30 September 2025.

Most photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.