



Bhutan: Country Dossier

January 2019

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit



OpenDoors

I tjänst för världens förföljda **kristna**

För mer information kontakta:

Open Doors **Sverige**
Idrottsvägen 16
702 32 Örebro

Telefon: 019 - 31 05 00
E-post: sweden@od.org
www.open-doors.se

World Watch List 2019

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017	Total Score WWL 2016	Total Score WWL 2015
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.9	94	94	92	92	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.6	94	93	89	88	81
3	Somalia	16.3	16.7	16.6	16.5	16.4	8.9	91	91	91	87	90
4	Libya	15.3	15.0	15.1	16.0	16.3	9.6	87	86	78	79	76
5	Pakistan	14.3	14.1	13.9	15.0	13.2	16.7	87	86	88	87	79
6	Sudan	14.7	15.0	14.6	15.6	16.1	10.6	87	87	87	84	80
7	Eritrea	14.7	14.9	15.8	16.0	15.2	9.4	86	86	82	89	79
8	Yemen	16.6	16.3	16.4	16.7	16.7	3.1	86	85	85	78	73
9	Iran	14.0	14.3	14.3	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	85	85	83	80
10	India	12.9	13.0	13.5	14.8	13.2	15.2	83	81	73	68	62
11	Syria	13.6	14.0	13.1	13.8	14.2	13.0	82	76	86	87	83
12	Nigeria	12.3	11.8	13.4	12.9	12.9	16.7	80	77	78	78	78
13	Iraq	13.9	14.4	14.1	14.6	13.6	8.1	79	86	86	90	86
14	Maldives	15.2	15.5	13.5	15.9	16.7	1.1	78	78	76	76	78
15	Saudi Arabia	15.1	13.6	14.0	15.3	16.5	2.4	77	79	76	76	77
16	Egypt	11.7	13.2	10.7	13.2	11.0	15.9	76	70	65	64	61
17	Uzbekistan	15.4	12.9	13.9	12.3	15.9	3.1	74	73	71	70	69
18	Myanmar	11.4	11.8	13.3	12.1	11.8	11.1	71	65	62	62	60
19	Laos	13.0	9.1	14.2	14.7	14.9	4.6	71	67	64	58	58
20	Vietnam	12.7	8.2	12.7	13.5	14.2	9.1	70	69	71	66	68
21	Central Africa Republic	10.2	9.7	11.9	10.6	11.1	16.1	70	61	58	59	67
22	Algeria	13.1	14.2	10.1	11.8	12.7	7.6	70	58	58	56	55
23	Turkmenistan	14.6	10.8	13.8	13.3	15.1	1.3	69	68	67	66	63
24	Mali	11.4	10.1	11.5	9.2	9.9	15.4	68	59	59	55	52
25	Mauritania	13.9	14.0	12.2	13.0	13.3	0.6	67	57	55	-	50
26	Turkey	12.4	11.1	10.7	13.2	10.9	7.2	66	62	57	55	52
27	China	10.4	8.0	10.3	11.8	14.5	10.0	65	57	57	57	57
28	Ethiopia	10.0	10.0	10.3	10.8	10.4	13.5	65	62	64	67	61
29	Tajikistan	13.8	11.9	11.6	12.1	12.9	2.4	65	65	58	58	50
30	Indonesia	10.6	11.1	11.3	10.2	9.3	12.0	65	59	55	55	50
31	Jordan	13.0	13.1	11.8	11.5	12.2	3.0	65	66	63	59	56
32	Nepal	12.4	11.4	10.6	10.9	11.9	7.0	64	64	-	-	-
33	Bhutan	12.9	11.1	12.3	12.4	14.0	0.9	64	62	61	56	56
34	Kazakhstan	13.2	10.8	10.3	12.2	13.5	3.1	63	63	56	55	51
35	Morocco	12.2	13.3	9.6	12.0	14.4	1.5	63	51	49	47	47
36	Brunei	13.4	14.3	10.5	10.3	13.4	0.7	63	64	64	61	58
37	Tunisia	12.1	13.2	10.7	11.2	12.0	3.3	63	62	61	58	55
38	Qatar	13.0	12.6	10.3	11.0	14.1	1.1	62	63	66	65	64
39	Mexico	8.3	7.5	12.2	10.2	9.7	13.5	61	59	57	56	55
40	Kenya	11.7	10.6	10.1	8.3	11.5	8.3	61	62	68	68	63
41	Russian Federation	12.5	8.4	10.7	10.4	12.0	5.7	60	51	46	48	45
42	Malaysia	11.8	14.2	12.1	11.7	8.6	1.5	60	65	60	58	55
43	Kuwait	13.2	12.2	10.1	10.5	12.2	1.5	60	61	57	56	49
44	Oman	12.9	12.5	9.8	9.6	12.8	1.7	59	57	53	53	55
45	United Arab Emirates	12.8	12.0	9.1	10.5	12.2	1.9	58	58	55	55	49
46	Sri Lanka	11.0	8.3	10.5	11.5	10.0	7.0	58	57	55	-	51
47	Colombia	7.9	7.6	11.8	9.4	8.5	12.6	58	56	53	55	55
48	Bangladesh	11.0	9.1	11.6	10.5	7.8	7.8	58	58	63	57	51
49	Palestinian Territories	11.4	12.3	9.0	10.6	11.8	2.4	57	60	64	62	58
50	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.3	11.1	12.4	1.5	57	57	-	57	50
51	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.9	13.9	0.4	56	-	56	56	56
52	Kyrgyzstan	12.7	9.9	10.9	9.2	11.9	1.9	56	-	-	-	-
53	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.0	56	56	57	58	60
54	Democratic Republic of the Congo	5.6	6.7	9.3	7.4	10.3	16.1	55	-	-	-	-
55	Bahrain	11.9	12.2	8.6	10.2	10.2	1.5	55	57	54	54	-
56	Cameroon	9.9	7.3	10.0	7.8	7.5	11.3	54	-	-	-	-
57	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.8	4.8	52	-	59	57	56
58	Niger	11.5	9.7	8.1	8.1	10.0	4.8	52	-	-	53	-
59	Cuba	8.8	4.4	9.1	10.5	11.8	3.9	49	-	-	-	-
60	Chad	11.5	8.2	9.0	8.0	8.7	3.0	48	-	-	-	-
61	Burkina Faso	9.0	8.0	8.8	6.6	7.9	7.2	48	-	-	-	-
62	Uganda	11.4	8.0	7.7	6.9	9.6	3.7	47	-	-	-	-
63	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	5.0	46	-	-	-	-
64	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.5	5.8	8.0	15.0	44	-	-	-	-
65	Mozambique	6.7	4.3	6.0	6.9	6.0	13.3	43	-	-	-	-
66	Gambia	7.7	8.2	8.2	8.3	8.8	1.9	43	-	-	-	-
67	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.7	8.2	5.5	6.4	4.3	43	-	-	-	-
68	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	3.3	43	-	-	-	-
69	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.1	8.7	10.4	6.1	42	-	-	-	-
70	Togo	8.8	6.7	8.5	7.1	8.4	2.0	42	-	-	-	-
71	Venezuela	3.3	3.8	10.5	9.0	8.8	5.9	41	-	-	-	-
72	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	6.7	41	-	-	-	-
73	Nicaragua	2.3	3.6	6.4	8.9	7.9	11.9	41	-	-	-	-

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Introduction

This country report is a collation of documents based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) including statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations, and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD). Further news and analysis is supplied by World Watch Monitor and WWR staff.

World Watch List Bhutan	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2019	64	33
WWL 2018	62	33
WWL 2017	61	30
WWL 2016	56	38
WWL 2015	56	31

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

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

WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Bhutan

Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12480707>

Recent country history

Bhutan was a kingdom with little contact with the outside world until the 1970s. In March 2008 it became a two-party parliamentary democracy after elections. 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 helps the country to make different thinking and values welcome, but it could also lead to a renewed emphasis on the country's 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 limiting additional foreign influence. As Bhutanese life is closely connected with the Buddhist religion and culture, anyone not adhering to Buddhism is watched with suspicion. This does not mean that such people are expelled from their homes or lose access to community resources, but they do become social pariah.

The religious landscape

Bhutan has always been a Buddhist kingdom and is one of the last places where [Vajrayana Buddhism](#) is still practiced, although its ties with neighboring India have always been strong. 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, people are expected to do so. This means that all deviants are met with suspicion, for example Christians. Since the country's identity is tied with its cultural heritage, which is Buddhism, this causes the state to adopt a stringent 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 Nepali ethnicity, many of them are living among the people who poured into Bhutan in the early 20th century. In the 1990s, more than 100,000 refugees fled Bhutan for Nepal (the so-called "southern question" concerning the Lhotshampa refugees). There are efforts to make repatriation agreements, but in the meantime the situation has changed. According to reports (e.g. from the Bertelsmann Transition Index Country Report 2018), 90,000 refugees already moved to third countries, particularly the United States, leaving "only" 10,000 refugees in Nepal. All this may be contributing to the government's hesitation to officially recognize Christians as a legal entity in Bhutan, despite promises being made to legalize their status in due course.

The political 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. A constitution was not enacted until 2008, when Bhutanese citizens elected a parliament and the new king was inaugurated at the age of 28, making 2018 already his 10th anniversary as king. The king 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. [Elections](#) in April 2018 were low-key, reflecting the position parliament holds in the system. The same holds true for elections in October 2018, although

a new party was voted into power and there had been some [mud-slinging](#), which was rather unusual for the country. 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 in August 2016, when a journalist was [charged with defamation](#) as he dared to challenge the country's nobility and called the independence of Bhutan's judiciary into question. Another journalist was slapped with a [three-months-sentence](#) in August 2018, calling into question the country's commitment to freedom of expression.

The socio-economic landscape

Bhutan is rich in resources and exports electricity to India, which contributes greatly to the state's income. Surprisingly, in a report published 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. Bhutan relies heavily on the tourist industry and Indian tourists in particular are visiting the country in increasing numbers. 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.

Christians seeking employment face problems as they are a minority; they are victims of discrimination and are short of alternatives. They often have to live in difficult economic and social circumstances.

Concluding remarks

Bhutan fears that greater civil freedoms might result in divisions and unrest within the country due to its geo-strategic vulnerability, which could be exploited by foreign forces. There is 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. 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: This could indicate that Buddhism is losing significance in Bhutanese society which might eventually lead to both state and society adopting a more tolerant approach towards other religious groups in the country.

External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Bhutan

1. The religious landscape: Vajrayana Buddhism - <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vajrayana>
2. The political landscape: Elections - <http://www.ecb.bt/?p=5621>
3. The political 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>
4. The political landscape: charged with defamation - <http://thediplomat.com/2016/08/in-bhutan-a-facebook-post-leads-to-defamation-charges/>
5. The political landscape: three-months-sentence - <https://thediplomat.com/2018/08/when-freedom-of-expression-isnt-free-journalism-facebook-and-censorship-in-bhutan/>

6. The socio-economic landscape: second most polluted city -
<https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/bhutans-happiness-faces-the-growing-pains-of-development/>

WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2018	Christians	Chr%
817,000	30000	3.7

Source: Open Doors estimate for number of Christians 2018.

How did Christians get there?

First Christian traces can be tracked 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.

What church networks exist today?

Open Doors estimates that Christians make up around 3.7% of the total population. Christianity is said to be concentrated in towns and in the south, where a strong influx from migrants from Nepal and India has taken place over the years, leading to efforts by the government to "Bhutanize" these minorities. Roman Catholics are a small minority with most Christians belonging to a variety of Pentecostal networks.

Religious context

Religious Context: Bhutan	Numbers	%
Christians	SEE OPEN DOORS ESTIMATE ABOVE	SEE OPEN DOORS ESTIMATE
Muslim	1,900	0.2
Hindu	92,400	11.3
Buddhist	684,000	83.7
Ethnoreligionist	27,200	3.3
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	91	0.0
Atheist	0	0.0
Agnostic	230	0.0
Other	0	0.0

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

Statistics shown in this table are based on WCD estimates: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

Most Christians come from a Nepali background, many of whom are living in the south. According to WCD 2018, an estimated 83.7% of the population practice different forms of Buddhism. The remaining part of the population mainly practices Hinduism (again, mostly of Nepali origin).

Government statistics state that 28% of the population was of Nepalese ethnicity in the 1980s, but some estimations run as high as 40%. Some Bhutanese are of tribal origin, others are either ethnic Tibetan or are of Tibetan and South Asian origin.

Notes on the current situation

Christians in Bhutan face many critical issues such as disunity, lack of trained leadership, insensitive influence by foreign groups (who often do more harm than good), lack of religious materials in the national language, and the tendency to be fixated on healings and miracles. Christians also struggle with a lot of social problems as well as challenges in their family life.

Christians continue to be monitored by the state and their gatherings for worship are sometimes investigated and closed. Christianity is seen as foreign and alien to the country's "spiritual heritage" (i.e. Buddhism).

External Links - WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

1. How did Christians get there?: William Mackey -
https://web.archive.org/web/20070823171120/http://www.nieparo.edu.bt/WebPages/Publications/The_Call/4_How_It_All_Began.pdf

WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

With a score of 64 points Bhutan ranked 33rd in WWL 2019.

What type of persecution dominates?

- **Religious nationalism:** Buddhism is a part of the social fabric and 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.
- **Ethnic antagonism:** In some areas, the traditional Bön belief prevails, the fusion of tribal belief and Buddhism has caused persecution especially in the central and eastern parts of the country.
- **Denominational protectionism:** Switching denominations, for whatever reasons, is very difficult and results in persecution by Christian leaders and family.

Who is driving persecution?

In their effort to maintain national identity and unity, government authorities suppress or eliminate perceived “foreign” elements, including Christianity. As per Constitution, the government upholds Buddhist beliefs as the country’s “national heritage” in its management of the country and does not recognize any clear distinction of religion and state. Therefore, one could say that the government is operating on two levels: On one level, government officials are drivers of persecution as executors of state power; on another level they are true followers of Buddhism and the country’s spiritual heritage. Buddhist (and at times even Hindu) leaders are drivers of persecution as well. 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 Christians in the central and eastern parts of the country. For converts, family members are another strong driver of persecution.

What it results in

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. 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”. This is needed for loan applications, registering property, applying for jobs and the renewal of ID cards.

Violence

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

Bhutan	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018	0	0	0	1	1
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	0	0	0	2	0

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

Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period

Persecution in Bhutan has never been particularly violent. For security reasons, it is not possible to supply details about incidents occurring.

- One house-church was forced to close down and cease meetings having received warnings and threats from the authorities. Two pastors were held for questioning.
- Christian students have reportedly been forced to participate in morning and evening Buddhist rituals and in one instance, even in cleaning Buddhist shrines.
- One of the traditions of farmers in Bhutan is community planting and harvesting, where several farmers share the workload and help each other. Christian farmers have usually been excluded from this practice.

WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 64 points Bhutan ranked 33rd in WWL 2019. Although the overall score is two points higher than in WWL 2018, the score for violence did go down. Pressure is very high in virtually 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 farmers, denied official documents by the authorities, or experiencing discrimination at school.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Bhutan	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Not at all
Religious nationalism	RN	Very strong
Ethnic antagonism	EA	Weak
Denominational protectionism	DPR	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 (long version).

Religious nationalism (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". Accordingly, Buddhism is 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. 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 often side with the monks.

Ethnic antagonism (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. 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

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

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

Drivers of Religious nationalism:

In their effort to maintain national identity and unity, government authorities suppress (or eliminate) perceived "foreign" elements, including Christianity. AS per Constitution, the government upholds Buddhist beliefs as the country's "national heritage" and does not recognize any a clear distinction of religion and state. Government officials are hence drivers of persecution as executors of state power. Buddhist (and at times even Hindu) leaders are also drivers of persecution. For converts, family members are another strong driver of persecution.

Drivers of Ethnic antagonism:

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. Leaders in traditional faiths and family and community are the most potent drivers of persecution in this respect. This is especially true for Christians in the central and eastern parts of the country.

Context

Bhutan is a country squeezed between two giant neighbors: India to its south and China to its north. It does not appear in international headlines much, except when its two neighbors decide to have a [military standoff](#) at their much disputed border. This occurred in the period June-August 2017, when Bhutan also rejected China's territorial claim on the Doklam plateau. The country has gained some fame for its invention of the Gross National Happiness index for measuring its citizens' overall happiness. Democracy continues to develop firmer roots, albeit in a climate in which all parties agree with the dominance of Buddhism and loyalty to the king. The situation for Christians, who are a small minority among the Bhutanese, has remained unchanged: They still lack official status and recognition.

Bhutan faces economic challenges and needs to find ways of giving the younger generation good perspectives for the future. In the WWL 2019 reporting period, this has continued to be urgent, especially when in May 2018 a report emerged according to which the World Health Organization (WHO) named the Bhutanese city of Pasakha as the [second most polluted city](#) in the world. The country is strongly relying on tourism and environmental pollution is giving bad headlines. Although the numbers of tourists and the revenue it earns with foreign currency seem to have stabilized, it is nevertheless becoming harder to offer young adults a career perspective in tourism. Another challenge which does not really fit into the image of a happy nation, is the question of how to care for the relatively large numbers of [mentally ill people](#) in the country.

Depending how economic developments progress, there may be repercussions for the Christian minority. If the country falls into serious economic difficulties, it may rely on placing greater emphasis on its Buddhist cultural heritage, so making any recognition of the growing Christian minority a far-off dream. If the economy develops positively, this may relax the country's emphasis on its Buddhist heritage and make recognition of the Christian community a possibility. The new government, [elected into power](#) in October 2018, does not promise too big changes, especially not as far as civil rights and especially freedom of religion are affected. This was shown in August 2018, when a journalist was given a [three-months-sentence](#) for calling the country's commitment to freedom of expression into question.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians: The very few expatriate Christians usually join the existing house- churches and are therefore not treated here as a separate WWL category for scoring.

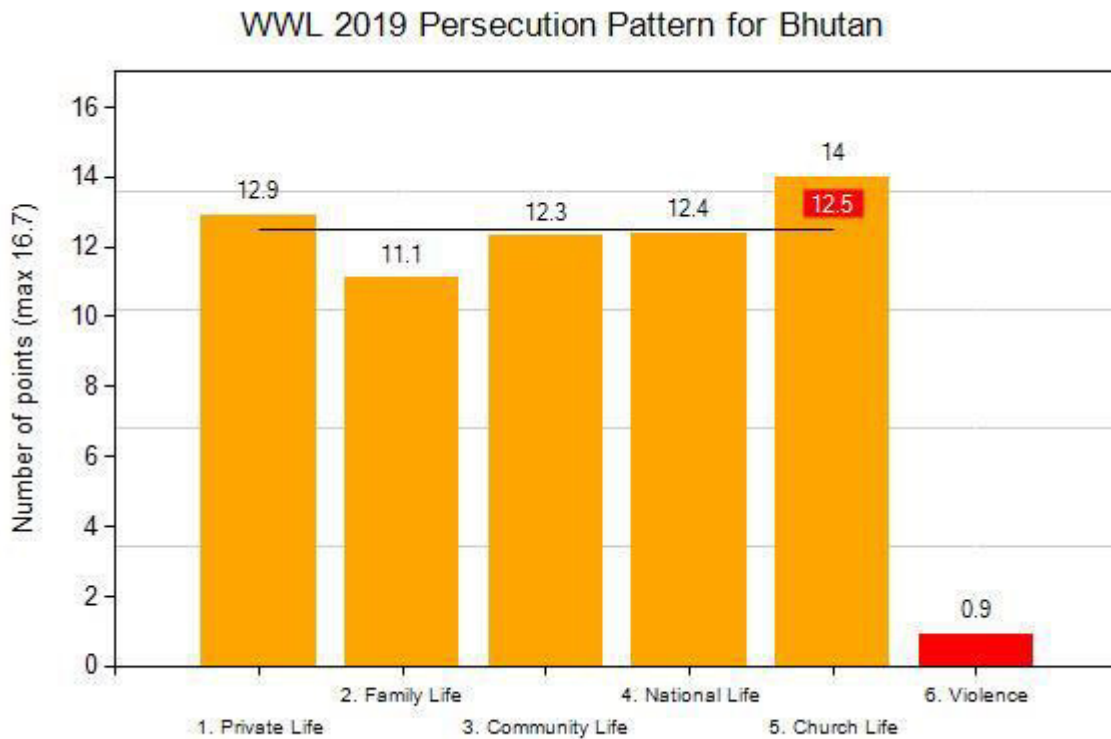
Historical Christian communities: In the 19th century, a small Roman Catholic presence existed under the Indian diocese of Darjeeling, and this is still present today. They are tolerated to a certain extent, as they tend to keep to themselves. However, they lack official recognition and are subject to discrimination just like all other Christian denominations.

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.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The WWL 2019 Persecution pattern for Bhutan shows:

- The overall pressure on Christians in Bhutan remained at a very high level, with the average pressure level rising from 12.1 in WWL 2018 to 12.5 in WWL 2019.
- 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 in not being recognized as a fellowship.
- The score for violence against Christians decreased from 1.1 in WWL 2018 to 0.9 points in WWL 2019.

Private sphere:

All conversions face opposition and "forced conversion" is punishable by law, but the term "forced" is open to interpretation; in practice, conversion is simply forbidden in most cases. Section 463 (A) of the country's Penal Code stipulates that conversion by means of coercion or other means of inducement is a punishable offense. However, neither "coercion" nor "other means of inducement" are clearly defined. All conversions are strictly opposed by family, community, religious authorities and the state. Indeed, even the distribution of a simple Gospel tract (without having a discussion about Christ or inviting a person to a church meeting) can be ground for arrest. Consequently, converts have to be very careful in the way they worship, especially if they are the only Christians in their family. For converts, it can be dangerous to display Christian symbols in private, especially if their family members are not Christians. Christians meet in most cases in rented houses; this can be difficult if the owner of

the house is a Buddhist. Rarely do any Christians display Christian symbols in their houses or wear them. In rural areas, known converts are often closely monitored. In the WWL 2019 period, there were several cases reported where Christians have been held in isolation by their families or thrown out of their home.

Family sphere:

Once converts are discovered, they can face the threat of divorce (if married) and lose inheritance rights. They can also be declared as mentally ill by their immediate family. Organizing a baptism in public is not possible because it is illegal: Christian funerals are also very difficult to arrange and often impossible; Christians usually bury their deceased in neighboring India. Many Christians do not get issued with an electronic National Identity Card because of their religion, and especially converts face this problem. Also, for day-to-day life, all citizens need a document referred to as a "non-objection certificate" (NOC) which is issued by village authorities to confirm that the individual in question 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. Christians sometimes fail to be issued with a NOC or have a hard time obtaining it.

Children of Christians are required to learn and to practice Buddhism, face opposition from teachers and pupils at school and are frequently bullied. They are even made to participate in daily morning and evening Buddhist prayer and annual rituals under very strict observation and often, they are 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 there has been a case where a Christian schoolgirl was forced - for over a year - to clean a shrine with all its statues and bow down in worship.

Community sphere:

Converts face strong pressure from family, friends and neighbors who often threaten to report them to the local authorities if they do not renounce their Christian faith. One of the traditions of farmers in Bhutan is community planting and harvesting. However, Christians are excluded from this and cannot count on any help. 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. Children require a letter of recommendation from the village head or from the local government office in order to be admitted to schools; Christians often have difficulties in obtaining such letters. And if they succeed, their children face discrimination in school by being given lower grades, which in turn makes it difficult for them to qualify for higher education. In schools, everyone is required to follow Buddhist rituals. Christians are also frequently asked to participate in the traditional religious festivals in their community. Additionally, Christians who want to start a business are often left out of government subsidy schemes.

National sphere:

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. Christians are not allowed to display Christian symbols publicly, and no Christian civil society organizations are permitted. Courts sentence Christians severely, even when the accusations against them are based on little evidence. The very few Christian civil servants are under high pressure to participate in Buddhist rites and contribute to festivals. Where they refuse, they are pressed to resign. If Christians have a record of "unethical conversion", they will not get a NOC, as mentioned above.

Christianity is vilified in social media as well. One Facebook post from 25 March 2018 read: "Christianity in Bhutan needs to be unitedly squashed at our own patriotic level: External threats can be noticed and identified. Subsequently, modalities to counter challenge is possible to be worked out accordingly at our Government level. However, attempts to damage our culture and religion that has already infiltrated within our society should be identified and disclosed over social media, particularly their strong holds and base for their weekend gatherings and holy Christian days. Ministry of Home & Cultural Affairs and Royal Bhutan Police will have to take action once the private houses leased for such gatherings, utilized in lieu of Churches for the purpose of mass prayers and hymns conducted, are pinpointed for the government to locate it. Practice of individual faith and belief are permitted by law but not through new establishment such as a churches or mosques or in lieu thereof for the purpose of preaching, teaching, conducting prayers, ceremonial mass and hymns are allowed that never coexisted in our history. Along with your comments, if anyone of the readers out here have the knowledge of such unlawful housings and the preachers; please mention the following: 1. Name of the place 2. Name of the Street (Road/Lam) 3. House No. 4. Name of the Landlord 5. Name of the Head/Chieftain/Priest Avoid mentioning the followers, those should be viewed as innocent after money only. Once the facilitators are fixed they would gradually revert back to the mainstream. If you love and care your culture and religion, move now to activate the Law of the country to take on these illicit harboring and preaching be it in any nooks and corners of our country. Stop them flourishing before it is too late. Now or Never."

Church sphere:

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 the Commission of Religious Organizations (CRO) often do not hear back from them. At present, there is not a single Christian group which is recognized in the country.

The government continues to keep gatherings confined to household premises also as a way of limiting the growth of Christianity and making them dependent on the landlord. Some Christians have managed to rent larger places, but all run the risk of being discovered, and some have been visited by the authorities. There have been incidents where Christians have been threatened with serious consequences if they continue to meet. As a result, many Christians choose to gather very early in the morning or in the evening (with lights off) to avoid raising suspicion. 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.

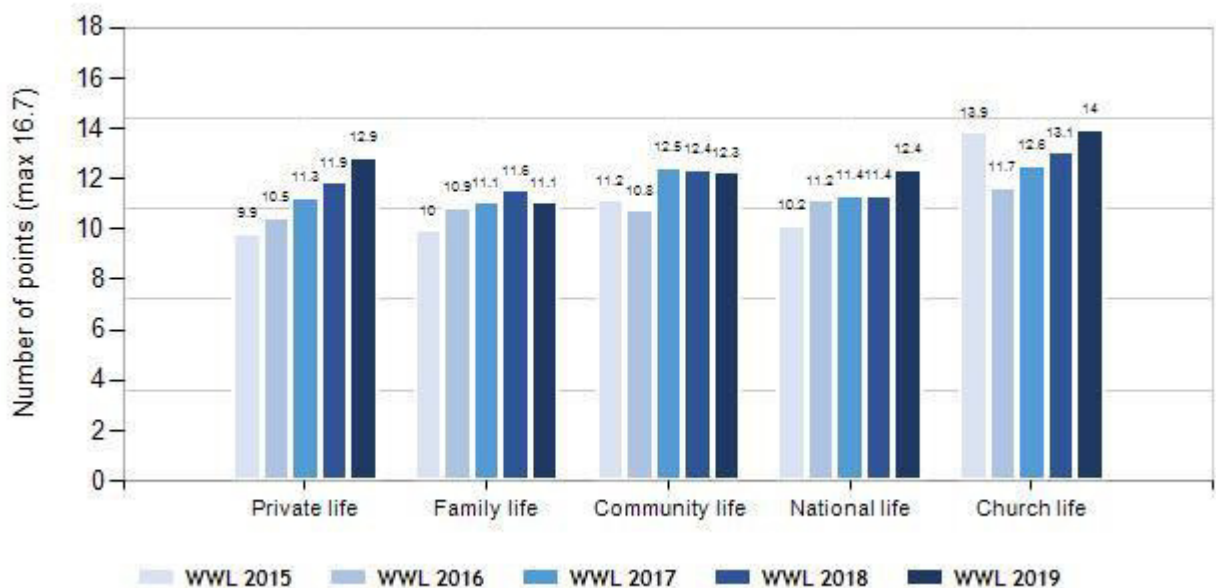
Violence:

Persecution is not very violent in Bhutan, since the authorities prefer to use other, less visible means. However, in the reporting period one house church was forced to close down due to pressure by authorities. For a summary of the statistics on violence and further examples, please see the Short and Simple Persecution Profile section above.

5 Year trends

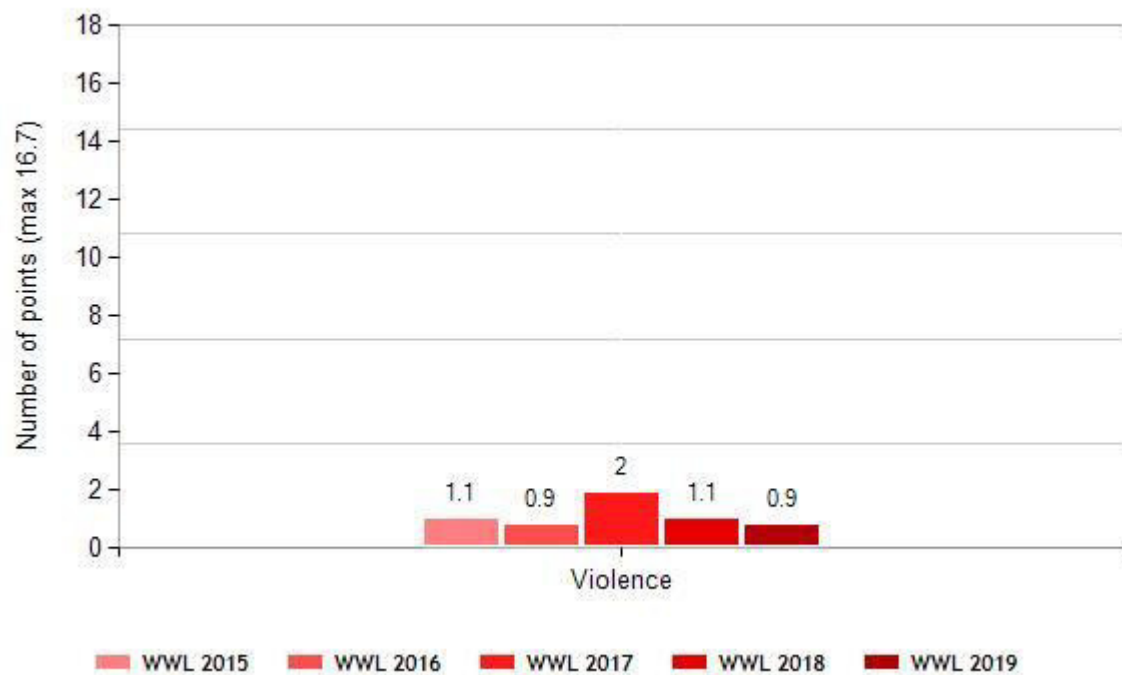
Reviewing the last five reporting periods, Chart 1 shows that the pressure on Christians in *Private life*, *National life* and *Church life* has more or less increased steadily. It can also be seen that the scores for pressure in *Community life* are levelling off at a very high level, reflecting the fact that Christians continue to be seen as a foreign influence which is unfitting for a Buddhist country. The average level of pressure (Chart 2) shows a clear increase from 11.0 in WWL 2015 to 12.5 in WWL 2019. Chart 3 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.

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



WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: Bhutan	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2019	12.5
2018	12.1
2017	11.8
2016	11.0
2015	11.0

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Bhutan (Violence)



Gender specific persecution

Female:/Male: There is still no information on gender specific persecution in Bhutan available. However, if male Christians lose their job, are excluded from the traditional way of farming or - in rare cases - are arrested, this affects the whole family as the men are usually the main breadwinners.

Persecution of other religious minorities

Besides the Christian community, the tiny Muslim minority in Bhutan is not recognized as well. Hindus (who are of Nepali ethnicity) enjoy a certain form of recognition, but are treated as second class citizens and hence face discrimination as well.

Future outlook

The political outlook: The way Bhutan decided to remain quiet during the June-August 2017 military stand-off between China and India and did nothing which could be perceived as taking sides, has to be seen as a wise decision. Indeed, Bhutan's survival might depend upon balancing the needs and wishes of China and India. Maybe the authorities will be busier watching foreign relations than they are with internal politics. [Elections](#) for the National Council in April 2018 were very low-key, reflecting the fact that there are more important institutions in the country than the parliament.

The outlook for Christians – viewed through the lens of:

- *Religious nationalism:* In a situation where Bhutan needs to show its own unique place in the region, it is very likely that it will do so by emphasizing its exceptional religious and cultural heritage. This is true for the new government (elected in October 2018) as well. As far as civil rights are concerned, the sentencing of a journalist in August 2018 (see "Context") above, does not point to a more open policy either.

Conclusion: It seems that the Christian community in Bhutan is unlikely to get the protection and space it deserves in the coming months. The future of the Christian minority will continue to be determined by how *Religious nationalism* (the country's main persecution engine) develops.

External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

1. Persecution engines: Mahayana Buddhism - <http://www.religionfacts.com/mahayana>
2. Context: military standoff - <http://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/india-china-08182017175038.html>
3. Context: second most polluted city - <https://thedi diplomat.com/2018/05/bhutans-happiness-faces-the-growing-pains-of-development/>
4. Context: mentally ill people - <https://thedi diplomat.com/2018/11/bhutan-the-mental-state-of-the-happy-kingdom/>
5. Context: elected into power - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/10/bhutan-voters-chooses-centre-left-dnt-general-election-181018184758313.html>
6. Context: three-months-sentence - <https://thedi diplomat.com/2018/08/when-freedom-of-expression-isnt-free-journalism-facebook-and-censorship-in-bhutan/>
7. Future outlook: Elections - <http://www.ecb.bt/?p=5621>

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 Bhutan.

Open Doors article(s) from the region

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

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

World Watch Monitor news articles

Up-to-date articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/bhutan>

Recent country developments

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