



## BHUTAN: Country Dossier

June 2018



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

June 2018 / 2

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

[www.opendoorsanalytical.org](http://www.opendoorsanalytical.org)

# World Watch List 2018

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2017	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2016	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2015	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2014
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.6	94	92	92	92	90
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	89	88	81	78
3	Somalia	16.0	16.2	16.1	16.3	16.4	10.4	91	91	87	90	80
4	Sudan	14.2	14.5	14.3	15.6	16.0	12.0	87	87	84	80	73
5	Pakistan	14.4	13.5	13.8	15.0	13.1	16.7	86	88	87	79	77
6	Eritrea	15.2	14.5	15.8	16.1	15.2	9.4	86	82	89	79	72
7	Libya	15.2	15.3	14.2	15.7	15.5	10.4	86	78	79	76	71
8	Iraq	14.7	14.7	14.9	14.9	15.1	11.3	86	86	90	86	78
9	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.4	16.5	16.7	2.6	85	85	78	73	74
10	Iran	14.0	14.1	14.5	15.8	16.4	10.0	85	85	83	80	77
11	India	12.6	12.7	13.2	14.7	12.9	14.4	81	73	68	62	55
12	Saudi Arabia	14.9	13.7	14.2	15.5	16.4	4.1	79	76	76	77	78
13	Maldives	15.2	15.5	13.5	15.8	16.7	1.1	78	76	76	78	77
14	Nigeria	11.8	11.5	13.1	12.1	12.1	16.5	77	78	78	78	70
15	Syria	14.4	14.3	14.1	14.5	14.7	3.7	76	86	87	83	79
16	Uzbekistan	15.5	12.1	13.0	13.1	16.0	3.5	73	71	70	69	68
17	Egypt	11.3	12.8	12.2	11.7	9.5	12.4	70	65	64	61	61
18	Vietnam	12.4	8.4	12.7	14.2	13.8	7.4	69	71	66	68	65
19	Turkmenistan	15.2	10.3	12.9	12.8	15.2	1.9	68	67	66	63	62
20	Laos	12.9	8.6	13.6	13.9	14.9	3.5	67	64	58	58	62
21	Jordan	13.2	13.3	11.5	10.9	13.0	4.3	66	63	59	56	56
22	Tajikistan	13.3	11.3	11.8	11.8	12.9	4.3	65	58	58	50	47
23	Malaysia	12.0	14.9	12.8	12.4	9.3	3.9	65	60	58	55	49
24	Myanmar	11.6	11.1	13.2	10.4	11.0	7.8	65	62	62	60	59
25	Nepal	12.6	11.9	10.7	11.5	12.4	4.6	64				
26	Brunei	14.3	14.2	10.7	10.2	13.5	0.9	64	64	61	58	57
27	Qatar	13.4	12.9	11.7	11.3	14.1	0.0	63	66	65	64	63
28	Kazakhstan	12.8	10.0	10.2	12.2	13.7	3.7	63	56	55	51	49
29	Ethiopia	9.8	10.0	10.8	10.9	10.5	10.4	62	64	67	61	65
30	Tunisia	11.9	13.2	10.6	10.7	12.0	3.9	62	61	58	55	55
31	Turkey	12.5	9.7	9.8	11.7	9.6	8.7	62	57	55	52	
32	Kenya	12.0	10.9	10.0	7.9	11.7	9.4	62	68	68	63	48
33	Bhutan	11.9	11.6	12.4	11.4	13.1	1.1	62	61	56	56	54
34	Kuwait	13.4	12.6	11.6	10.9	12.3	0.4	61	57	56	49	50
35	Central African Republic	9.0	8.1	10.1	8.9	8.8	16.1	61	58	59	67	67
36	Palestinian Territories	12.1	12.8	10.7	10.5	12.6	1.1	60	64	62	58	53
37	Mali	11.4	9.6	11.2	8.1	9.2	9.6	59	59	55	52	54
38	Indonesia	10.3	11.0	11.5	10.0	9.3	6.9	59	55	55	50	46
39	Mexico	8.3	7.6	12.1	10.7	9.7	10.4	59	57	56	55	
40	United Arab Emirates	13.6	12.2	10.0	10.4	11.8	0.2	58	55	55	49	51
41	Bangladesh	10.4	8.8	11.4	9.6	7.5	10.0	58	63	57	51	46
42	Algeria	12.3	13.1	7.5	10.4	12.4	2.0	58	58	56	55	54
43	China	9.2	7.2	8.0	10.7	13.3	9.1	57	57	57	57	51
44	Sri Lanka	11.1	7.6	10.5	11.3	10.1	6.9	57	55		51	55
45	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.1	9.3	11.1	12.4	2.4	57				
46	Oman	12.1	12.2	9.9	9.4	12.6	1.1	57	53	53	55	56
47	Mauritania	11.5	11.3	11.1	12.2	11.0	0.0	57	55		50	51
48	Bahrain	12.9	13.1	10.2	9.9	10.3	0.2	57	54	54		48
49	Colombia	7.9	7.6	11.9	8.6	8.5	11.9	56	53	55	55	56
50	Djibouti	12.2	12.2	10.3	9.9	11.7	0.0	56	57	58	60	46

## WWL 2018 Persecution Watch Countries<sup>1</sup>

Rank	Country	1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018
		Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
51	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.4	13.9	0.4	56
52	Kyrgyzstan	11.7	9.5	10.0	8.1	11.6	2.8	54
53	Tanzania	10.1	10.3	10.1	9.5	9.0	3.9	53
54	Russian Federation	11.1	8.4	10.1	8.9	10.7	2.0	51
55	Morocco	10.4	11.5	7.6	8.8	12.0	0.6	51
56	Cuba	8.5	4.9	10.7	10.4	12.2	2.4	49
57	Uganda	10.9	8.7	9.5	8.7	4.8	3.9	46
58	Niger	9.9	9.7	9.0	7.0	7.1	2.6	45

<sup>1</sup> These countries reached a score of 41 points or more but did not receive enough points to be included in the WWL Top 50.

# BHUTAN – Country Dossier (June 2018)

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

## Contents

World Watch List 2018.....	1
Introduction .....	2
WWL 2018: Keys to understanding BHUTAN.....	3
WWL 2018: Church History and Facts.....	4
WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile .....	6
WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics .....	7
WWR in-depth reports.....	14
Open Doors article(s) from the region.....	14
World Watch Monitor news articles.....	14
Recent country developments.....	15

## Introduction

This country report is a collation of documents based around [Open Doors World Watch List \(WWL\)](#)<sup>1</sup> including statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations, and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database ([WCD](#))<sup>2</sup>. Further news and analysis is supplied by [World Watch Monitor](#)<sup>3</sup> and WWR staff.

BHUTAN		
World Watch List	Score	Rank
WWL 2018	62	33
WWL 2017	61	30
WWL 2016	56	38
WWL 2015	56	31
WWL 2014	54	31

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/>

<sup>2</sup> WCD website: <http://www.brill.com/publications/online-resources/world-christian-database>

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

# WWL 2018: 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 sidelined (or at least challenged) by outward influences and the country is "Westernizing", there may be efforts limiting additional Western 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 become social pariahs.

## 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 a stronger effort to assert the dominance of Buddhism in the country.

Christians living in the south mainly come from 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. There are efforts to make repatriation agreements, but the situation remains tense. 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 age 28. 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. 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. That civil and political rights still have a long way to go 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.

## The socio-economic landscape

Bhutan is rich in resources and exports electricity to India, which contributes greatly to the state's income. Additionally, it relies heavily on tourism and Indian tourists particularly are increasingly visiting the country. 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 its 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.

## WWL 2018: Church History and Facts

### How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
793,000	20,000	2.5

Source: Open Doors estimate of number of Christians 2017

## How did Christians get there?

Portuguese missionaries made an unsuccessful visit in the 17th century. 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? <sup>4</sup>

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Open Doors estimates that Christians make up around 2.5% 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” those minorities. Roman Catholics are a small minority with most Christians belonging to a variety of Pentecostal networks.

## Religious context (selection)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others <sup>5</sup>
OD estimate 20,000	1,800	90,200	661,000	26,500	-	87	220

Source: WCD, May 2017

Most Christians come from a Nepali background, many of whom are living in the south. According to WCD, an estimated 83.4% of the population practice different forms of Buddhism. The remaining part of the population mainly practices Hinduism (again, mostly of Nepali origin). Official numbers say 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, the others are either ethnic Tibetan or mixed Tibetan with South Asian origin.

<sup>4</sup> **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. **Evangelicals:** 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. **Renewalists:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal movements.

<sup>5</sup> This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.

## 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 worship gatherings are sometimes threatened and closed. Two pastors were arrested in March 2014 on charges of evangelism and only released eight months later. This shows that Christianity is still seen as a foreign and dangerous religion and serves as a warning for the whole Christian community.

## WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

**Reporting period:** 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

**WWL 2018 Points: 62 / Position: 33**

WWL 2017 Points: 61 / Position: 30

WWL 2016 Points: 56 / Position: 38

## Where persecution comes from

In their effort to maintain national identity and unity, government authorities suppress or eliminate 'foreign' elements, which is what Christianity is perceived to be. The government upholds Buddhist beliefs as the country's national heritage in managing the country. The merging of ethnic beliefs with Buddhism has caused Buddhist (and sometimes even Hindu leaders) to persecute Christians. This is especially true for Christians in the central and eastern part of the country. For converts, family members are another strong driver of persecution.

## How Christians are suffering

Buddhism (partly mixed with traditional religions) is seen as the country's heritage and thus all Bhutanese are expected to follow Buddhism. Converts will at least be watched with suspicion, but in most cases efforts will be made to bring them back to their old religion. Religious leaders, the community and the family involved often cooperate in this. Local authorities often deny Christians (or make it very difficult for them to obtain) a "non-objection certificate". This is needed for loan applications, registering property, applying for jobs and the renewal of ID cards.

No churches have official recognition by the state. There have been debates about possible registration for some groups, but this has not yet led to any results. This means that Christians are technically worshipping illegally, baptisms cannot be held in public and Christian burials are often denied.

## Examples

- Despite her good performance in exams, one young student was forced to repeat her final year for no other reason than that she was known to be a Christian.
- Two house-churches were forced to close down and cease meetings having received warnings and threats from the authorities. (For security reasons, information on time and places are withheld.)
- 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 are usually excluded from this practice.

## WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics

**Reporting period:** 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

**WWL 2018 Points: 62 / Position: 33**

WWL 2017 Points: 61 / Position: 30

WWL 2016 Points: 56 / Position: 38

## Contents

Position on World Watch List (WWL).....	7
Persecution engines.....	8
Drivers of persecution.....	9
Context.....	9
Christian communities and how they are affected.....	10
Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence.....	11
Gender profile of persecution.....	13
Future outlook.....	14
Policy considerations.....	14

## Position on World Watch List (WWL)

Bhutan scores 62 on WWL 2018, an increase of approximately 0.7 points in comparison to WWL 2017. Although the score for violence halved in the WWL 2018 reporting period (with no Christians being arrested), there was an increase in pressure, particularly in the *Private* and the *Family spheres of life*, reflecting a slightly more difficult situation for Christian converts from Buddhism or ethnic-animist religion as they are not recognized in society and are therefore neglected (for instance, by being shunned by fellow farmers or being denied documents from the authorities).



## Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Bhutan <sup>6</sup>	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	Not at all
Religious nationalism	Very strong
Ethnic antagonism	Strong
Denominational protectionism	Medium
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Not at all
Organized corruption and crime	Not at all

### Religious nationalism (Very strong):

A continuing emphasis on Mahayana Buddhism as the country's spiritual heritage makes it 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." 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/dynamics 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 (Strong):

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 caused persecution especially in the central and eastern parts of the country.

<sup>6</sup> The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

## Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution for Bhutan	Level of influence
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very strong
Ethnic group leaders	Strong
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very weak
Violent religious groups	Not at all
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Strong
Own (extended) family	Very strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Weak
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Not at all
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

In their effort to maintain national identity and unity, government authorities suppress (or eliminate) perceived “foreign” elements, including Christianity. The government upholds Buddhist beliefs as the country’s national heritage in managing the country and does not know a 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 coming from the central and eastern part of the country. For converts, family members are another strong driver of persecution.

## 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](#)<sup>7</sup> at their much disputed border, as happened in the period June - August 2017. Bhutan decided to stay as quiet as possible. 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 a perspective. In the WWL 2018 reporting period, this has continued to be urgent. The country is

<sup>7</sup> See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/india-china-08182017175038.html>, last accessed 6 September 2017.

strongly relying on tourism. Both the numbers of tourists and the revenue it earns with foreign currency seem to have stabilized. However, it is becoming harder and harder to offer young adults a career perspective in tourism.

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.

Besides the Christian community, the tiny Muslim minority in Bhutan and the Hindus (who are of Nepali ethnicity) are not recognized and are hence frequently neglected as well.

## 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.

### **Historical Christian communities:**

First Christian traces can be tracked back to Jesuit missionaries arriving at Paro as early as 1626. In the 19th century, a small Roman Catholic presence existed under the Indian diocese of Darjeeling, and this is still present today.

### **Communities of converts to Christianity:**

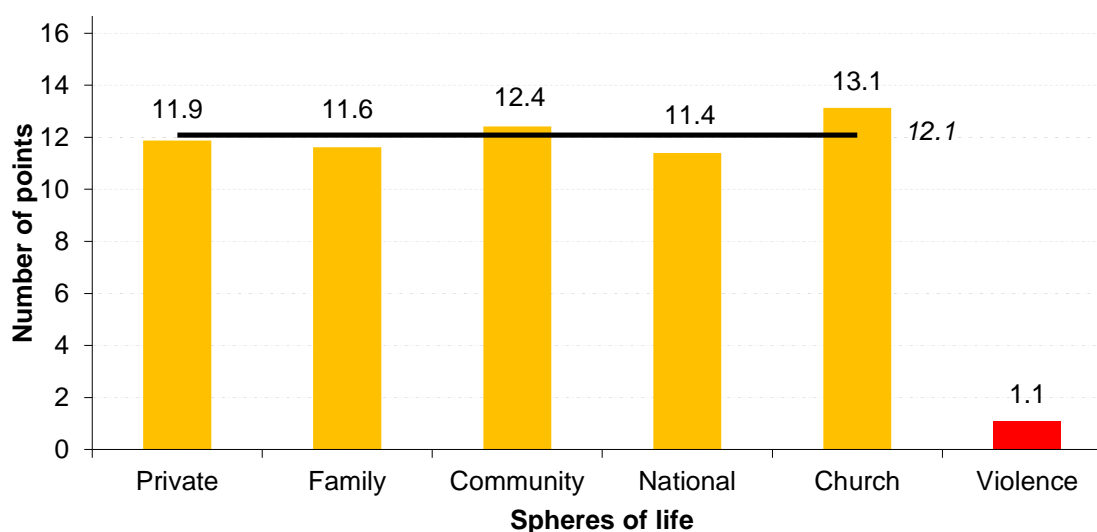
Converts from a Buddhist, Hindu or ethnic background face persecution from family, friends and neighbors.

### **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 detentions and arrests occur as well.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

**WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Bhutan**



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The WWL 2018 Persecution pattern for Bhutan shows:

- The overall pressure on Christians in Bhutan remained at a very high level, with average pressure rising from 11.8 in WWL 2017 to 12.1 in WWL 2018.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Church, Community and Private 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 fueled by the the Christian minority continuing to be neglected, be it in everyday life or when not being recognized as a fellowship.
- The score for violence against Christians almost halved, going down from 2.0 in WWL 2017 to 1.1 points in WWL 2018. No Christians were detained or sentenced for their faith.

### Private sphere:

All conversions face opposition and are mostly forbidden. Conversion is banned in line with Section 463 (A) of the country's Penal Code. It stipulates that conversion by means of coercion or other means of inducement is a punishable offense. Notably, "coercion" and "other means of inducement" are not defined. All conversions are strictly opposed by family, community, religious authorities and the state. Indeed, "forced conversion" is punishable by law, but the term "forced" is open to interpretation; in practice, conversion is simply forbidden in most cases. Even the distribution of a simple Gospel tract without having a discussion about Christ or inviting a person to church 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 yet believers. Christians meet in most cases in rented houses; this can be

difficult if the owner of the house is a Buddhist. Rarely do Christians display Christian symbols in their houses or wear them. In rural areas, known converts are often closely monitored.

**Family sphere:**

Once converts are discovered, they can face the threat of divorce (if married) and lose their inheritance rights. 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 show that the village has no problem with the individual. This certificate is needed for loan applications, registering property, applying for jobs and the renewal of ID cards. Christians often 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 and face opposition from teachers and pupils at school. In the WWL 2018 reporting period, an interview with a Christian schoolchild about being bullied by classmates had to be stopped because the interviewee was clearly traumatized. Converts are sometimes isolated by their families and hindered from meeting fellow Christians. Relatives of three Christians imprisoned for their faith were prohibited from visiting them in prison.

**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 getting 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. Also, 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 national’s spiritual heritage. This means that Buddhism is treated as state religion and all religious institutions have the constitutional duty to promote the spiritual heritage of Bhutan. On 24 May 2011, the government enacted an amendment to the law inserting 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 misdemeanor,” which is punishable with one to three years in prison. Christians are not allowed to display Christian symbols publically, 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, as happened in the WWL 2018 reporting period. If Christians have a record of “unethical conversion”, they will not get a NOC, as mentioned above.

**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.

In the WWL 2018 reporting period this resulted in a house-church closing down and house-churches in another district ceasing meetings. 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. There had been incidents where Christians were sentenced for proselytization, but they were released in 2016. As already mentioned under “Church sphere” above, two house-churches were forced to close down and cease meetings, having received threats and warnings from the authorities. For security reasons, the exact time and places cannot be mentioned.

## Gender profile of persecution

**Female/ Male:** No data available.

## Future 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. However, the [tensions are not over](#)<sup>8</sup> yet. Straight after declaring the stand-off terminated, the Chinese army told India to learn a lesson from this experience. Therefore it is very likely that within the region a lot of nervousness continues to linger. Maybe the authorities will be busier watching foreign relations than they are with internal politics.

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 referring to its exceptional religious and cultural heritage. In such a situation the Christian community in Bhutan is unlikely to get the protection and space it deserves. So the future of the Christian minority will continue to be determined by how *Religious nationalism*, the country's main persecution engine, develops.

## Policy considerations

Currently under review.

## WWR in-depth reports

There are currently no in-depth reports on Bhutan available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

## Open Doors article(s) from the region

There are currently no Open Doors articles on Bhutan available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

## World Watch Monitor news articles

There are currently no recent WWM news articles on Bhutan. Any new articles will be made available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/bhutan/>

---

<sup>8</sup> See: <http://thediplomat.com/2017/08/what-china-learned-about-india-at-doklam/>, last accessed 6 September 2017.

## Recent country developments

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

- [Bhutan: Stains on the happy face](#)  
7 June 2018  
The World Health Organization (WHO) recently named the Bhutanese city of Pasakha as the second most polluted city in the world.
- [Bhutan: First ever law school requires new mindset](#)  
2 November 2016  
Bhutan is setting up its first law school. This endeavor is struggling with Bhutan's traditional Buddhist mindset and presents the challenge of defining law in a nation that has been governed for much of its history in semi-theocracy and by monarchs.

[Return to top of document](#)