

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

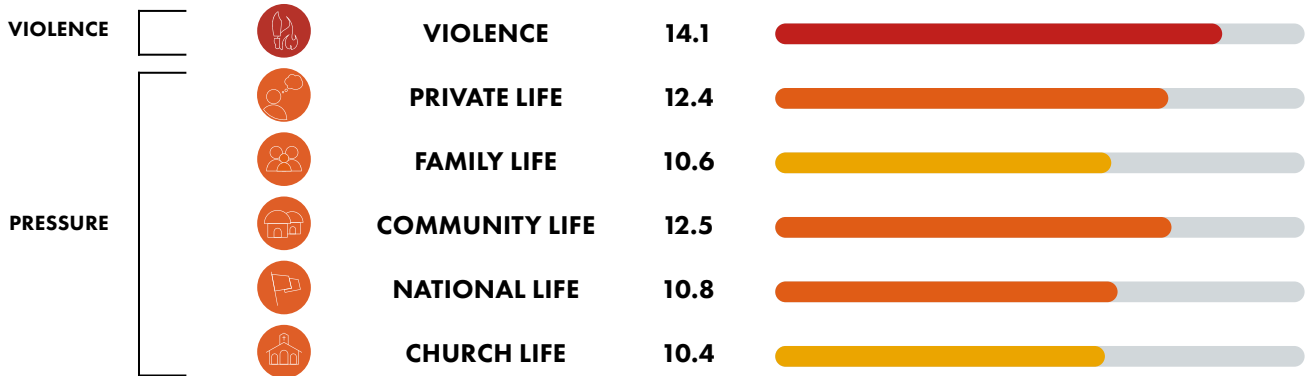
WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
26

BANGLADESH



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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 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

Bangladesh is one of the few countries where converts to the Christian faith originate from four different backgrounds. Converts from a Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or an ethnic/tribal background suffer the most severe restrictions, discrimination and attacks. They often gather in small house churches or secret groups due to fear of attack. Evangelistic churches working among the Muslim majority face persecution, but even historical churches like the Roman Catholic Church are increasingly faced with attacks and death threats. Tribal Christians face increasing double vulnerability (belonging to both an ethnic and religious minority) and struggle with land-grabbing issues and violence directed against them. The killing of eight tribal Christians on Maundy Thursday, 6 April 2023, in the Chittagong Hill Tracts was a rare, but not unprecedented, flare-up of violence in the country. Christians among the Muslim Rohingya, who fled to Bangladesh from Myanmar, are facing harassment and strong pressure from their community as well.

Quick facts

LEADER

Prime Minister Sheikh
Hasina Wazed

POPULATION

169,432,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

950,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Parliamentary Republic



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	950,000	0.6
Muslims	150,497,000	88.8
Hindus	15,791,000	9.3
Buddhists	1,241,000	0.7

Source²

Bangladesh has a long history of unrest and is a relatively young state, achieving independence by war from Pakistan in 1971. Since then, civilian governments and military rule have taken turns in power, and elections are regularly accompanied by much violence. According to a growing number of observers, Bangladesh has been entrenched in authoritarian rule since 2015.

According to World Christian Database's April 2023 estimates, just under 89% of the country's population is Muslim, mostly Sunni. Traditionally, relations between the Christian community and government have been good. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina even appointed a Catholic woman as her personal assistant

in July 2014. But a series of killings of secular journalists as well as members of various religious minorities have scared the latter and made them act more cautiously.

Recently, Muslim radicalism has been growing and the country's Hindu population (9%) suffer from attacks. Christians are a tiny minority and experience marginalization. Converts quickly come under pressure from either radical Islamic groups or the pervasive Islamic culture. They face much violence.

Death threats against atheist or human rights bloggers continue to be reported (DW, 24 August 2020). At the same time, observers point to a drop in the number of extrajudicial killings and disappearances and conclude that international pressure, including sanctions, is helping to remind the government and security forces that they are under scrutiny and will be held accountable (Lowy Institute, 26 January 2023). At the same time, the denial of re-registration for the long-standing and well-respected Human Rights organization Odhikar in June 2022 could be seen as a reaction towards this international pressure and is a sign of growing dictatorial paranoia as well. That the founders of Odhikar have each been sentenced to two years' imprisonment by the Dhaka Cyber Tribunal in September 2023 (Benar News, 14 September 2023) shows how serious the government is about its rule and image.

¹ Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

² Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Around half of the Christians in Bangladesh belong to the Roman Catholic Church, which has dioceses spread across the country. Protestants are also found throughout the country, but they are strongest in the ethnic minority tribal regions of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Protestant groups include Baptist, Brethren, Lutheran, Seventh Day Adventists, Assemblies of God, and the Church of Bangladesh (a union of Anglicans and Methodists).

While Bangladesh is largely ethnically homogenous - with 98% of the population being Bengali - minorities like the Chakma exist as well. Additionally, there are the “Hill Tribe People” in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (e.g. Garo, Santal and the Bawm) who include a large number of Christians among them. The Hill Tribe People are neglected and discriminated against by the authorities and harassed by the majority community, e.g. by land-grabbing (a recurring issue), including the destruction of houses and fields. These Christians experience double vulnerability, being tribal and Christian. Attacks from other tribes are a permanent risk as well, and this is what happened in April 2023, leaving eight Christians dead.

How the situation varies by region

Bangladesh’s northern region, with the Chittagong Hill Tracts and its many ethnic minorities, is a much-overlooked hotspot for rights violations against Christians perpetrated both by the Muslim majority and the Buddhist minority. The April 2023 attacks were a reminder that ethnic-religious hostilities play an often underestimated role. In the last few years, another hotspot developed when Bangladesh became host to more than a million Muslim refugees from neighboring Myanmar. Most of them are located in Cox’s Bazar district, at the south-eastern tip of Bangladesh. The country struggles to take care of them, even with the help of the international community. Repatriation efforts have been stalled and the longer the refugees have to stay in camps, the higher the risk is that some will be prone to Islamic radicalization. Additionally, as the junta continues to repress the remaining Rohingya minority in Rakhine State in Myanmar, it is impossible for them to go back. The refugee camps are also home to a tiny minority of Rohingya converts to Christianity. They face increasing pressure and violence but have no means of escape.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

This group includes embassy personnel and foreign workers from the important textile sector. They are observed and sometimes threatened by radical Islamic militants. This community also includes the Rohingya from Myanmar.

Historical Christian communities

This group includes the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Bangladesh (Anglican). They are frequently threatened and watched.

Converts to Christianity

This category includes converts from a variety of backgrounds: Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Tribal. They are facing the strongest persecution, not least from their own families and communities, and often gather secretly.

Non-traditional Christian communities

This group includes Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations. The Assemblies of God, for example, mainly gather for worship in house churches. They are frequently threatened and at times violently attacked.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Dictatorial paranoia, blended with Islamic oppression

Politics in Bangladesh is increasingly dominated by hostility between the ruling Awami League and the opposition, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP). Both parties give in to Islamic groups to attain more votes. Although Christians and other religious minorities enjoy more freedom than in many other Muslim countries, increasing political instability and violence means Christians often find themselves scapegoated. Particularly disconcerting is the opposition party's known ties to radical Islamic groups with a history of political violence.

Religious nationalism – Buddhists and Hindus, blended with ethno-religious hostility and clan oppression

There are almost twice as many Buddhists and more than 10 times as many Hindus than Christians. Buddhists are mostly among the indigenous people groups bordering India and Myanmar. In recent years, an increasing number of tribal Chakma (Buddhist) have converted to Christianity. Converts experience pressure from the local community, Buddhist and tribal leaders and radical Buddhists aiming to resist Christianity. In the majority of Hindu communities, leaders and families put pressure on Christian converts to return to Hinduism.



How are men and women differently affected?

Women

Bangladesh is a culturally class-based and patriarchal country, where it remains difficult to be a woman. Converts are vulnerable to family and community persecution. Conversion is viewed as a betrayal of culture and religion, and with high levels of dependency on males, sexual assault, rape and forced marriage are common. They may also be physically and mentally abused. Abduction and forced marriage are tangible threats facing all Christian women and girls, including in refugee camps. Many girls remain missing and law enforcement has proved inadequate.

Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

Men

The patriarchal culture in Bangladesh often results in males becoming Christians first. Because they are perceived as leaders within their families, men and boys often face persecution first. They are commonly beaten and threatened, victims of false accusations and imprisonment. Pressure from community members and local Muslim leaders has also caused men to flee their homes. As men are the main providers, if they lose their jobs because of their faith – or are imprisoned – it will affect their whole family.

Male typical pressure points:

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- False charges
- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	26	71
2023	30	69
2022	29	68
2021	31	67
2020	38	63

The WWL 2024 reporting period saw a further increase of 1.9 points in comparison to WWL 2023, continuing a rising trend in recent years. This increase in score was mainly due to an increase in the violence score by four points, reflecting the killing of eight tribal Christians in April 2023. The slight decrease in pressure scores across all spheres of life does not mean that the overall situation has improved. Due to the volatility in the country, with elections taking place in January 2024, it was more challenging to obtain reports. Apart from the various convert groups, the Christian minority, in general, continues to face discrimination, neglect and violence.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **April 2023:** Three churches were attacked, but no details can be provided.
- **6 April 2023:** Eight Bawm tribal Christians were killed in a gun battle between two insurgent groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (UCA News, 12 April 2023).
- **27 February 2023:** More than 1000 Telugu-speaking Christians were evicted from their homes and two churches were destroyed in Dholpur, South Dhaka (Asia News, 27 February 2023).

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government
2024	10	6	10*	2
2023	3	10	7	2

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.



Private life

It can be difficult for Christians to practice their faith privately. Converts live in fear and often prefer to keep their conversion a secret from their family. Those who choose to identify themselves are regularly harassed, bullied and threatened. It can be risky to meet with other Christians due to family pressure and societal monitoring.

Family life

The right to raise a family according to one's own religious beliefs is not always upheld for Christians. Christian ceremonies are frequently disrupted by mob violence. For students who are Christian or children of converts, the educational bias for Islamic studies in the curriculum is strong, both in terms of opportunities afforded to Islamic students and discrimination towards non-Muslims. There is also frequently a lack of Christian teachers. Children of converts are forced to continue attending Islamic classes and using Islamic textbooks.

Community life

Given their small numbers, Christians are often at the mercy of the surrounding community in terms of social and economic security. Radical Islamic pressure can encourage the community to be hostile towards Christians and encourage them to renounce their faith. Radical Islamic groups target vulnerable families and attempt to extort their conversions through promises of money, food and education for their children. Mob violence targeting groups of converts has also increased in recent years. Officially, Article 28 (1) of the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh proclaims, "The State shall not discriminate against

any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth," and Article 29 ensures equality of opportunity in public employment. However, in practice, minorities and especially Christians face widespread discrimination both socially and economically. Students are regularly judged by their names, leading to Christians having to take exams on Islamic religion because they have Islamic names, despite proving that they are Christians.

National life

Article 41(1)(a) of the Bangladesh Constitution protects the citizen's fundamental right to freely profess, practice, and propagate religion. Legally, anyone wishing to convert should visit a lawyer to present a signed document stating that he or she has changed religion for personal reasons, under no pressure and of their own free will. For any Christian, Buddhist or Hindu who wishes to become Muslim, this procedure is almost a formality. In contrast, Muslims wishing to become Christians encounter pressure from the lawyer, who sometimes even refuses (illegally) to register the conversion.

Church life

Increasing hostility towards Christians in recent years has made building and maintaining a vibrant church community an arduous task. Many radical Islamic groups monitor Christian churches, harassing and threatening violence against those they suspect of proselytization. Converts from Islam also face heavy scrutiny from their family and wider community authorities. Due to this, many church leaders are afraid to baptize converted Muslims for fear of violent reprisals.



International obligations & rights violated

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

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

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

- Christian converts are ostracized and faced with opposition by their families, threatened with divorce and loss of child custody (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian children are harassed because of their parents' faith (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christians face restrictions in employment in the public sector and experience discrimination in the private sector (ICCPR Arts. 25 and 26, and ICESCR Art. 6)
- Christians face harassment and violence if they talk about their faith or engage in proselytization (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)

Situation of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department IRFR 2022 Bangladesh: "Members of religious minorities, including Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians, who were sometimes also members of ethnic minorities, continued to say the government was ineffective in preventing communal violence against minority religious communities and did not protect minorities from forced evictions and land seizures stemming from land disputes. Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist organizations and local human rights groups said communal violence against religious minority communities continued throughout the year. In March, a mob of hundreds of people damaged the wall of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) temple in a property dispute over adjacent land. On January 31, unknown attackers killed a Buddhist monk in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). In March, women in Dhaka protested against discrimination they experienced for wearing head and face coverings. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Freedom House and local religious leaders said social media had contributed to an increase in attacks on religious minorities in recent years, as, they said, misinformation frequently went viral and inflamed community tensions against religious minorities."

Open Doors in Bangladesh

Open Doors' work to strengthen the church in Bangladesh includes:

- Discipling and equipping Christians on how to respond biblically to persecution and be obedient to God, especially the Great Commission
- Providing local language Bibles and other Christian literature
- Providing assistance through literacy and socio-economic empowerment
- Providing immediate relief to victims of persecution



About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

Many of the photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
