

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

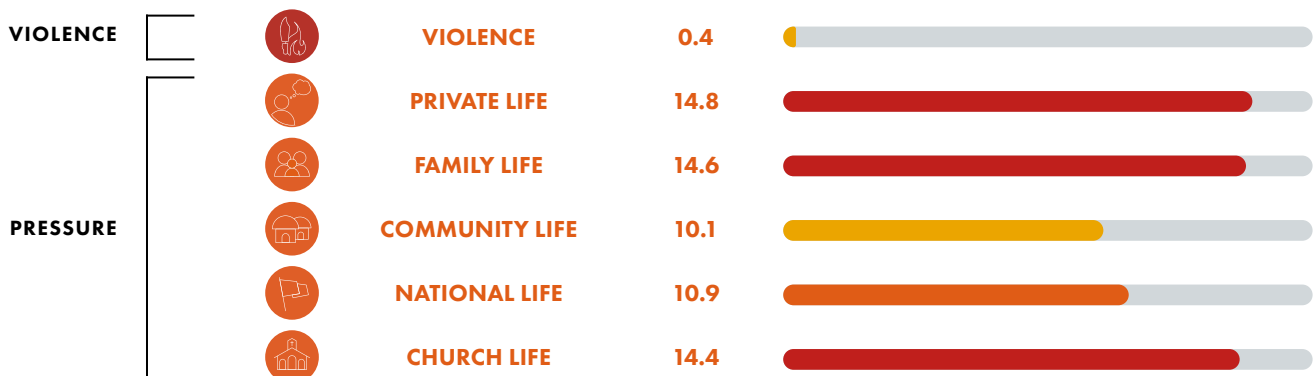
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**46**

## Brunei



### 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

Converts from Islam face pressure from their families (communities) and conversion is punishable by Sharia Penal Law if a case is brought against them. Everything will be done to bring them back to their original faith. Non-traditional Christian communities cannot be registered as churches, but to operate legally they are registered as companies, societies, or family centers. As such, they are treated as secular organizations and are required to submit their financial and operational reports to the government every year. The whole of society (Christians included) is affected by the continuing introduction of Sharia laws.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

Sultan and Prime Minister Sir Hassanal Bolkiah

### POPULATION

445,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

53,500<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Absolute Monarchy



## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	53,500	12.0
Muslims	258,000	58.0
Ethno-religionists	44,900	10.1
Buddhists	44,600	10.0

Source<sup>2</sup>

In Brunei, the Sultan rules as [absolute monarch](#). People deeply respect the Sultan and there is little demand for more political participation. Until now, the government has provided free medical services and subsidized goods such as rice and housing. State schooling is free, and citizens of Brunei do not have to pay income tax.

The national philosophy is Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB), a blend of Malay and Islamic cultural values guarded by the monarchy. May 2014 saw the introduction of the Sharia Penal Code (which also applies to non-Muslims); however, [implementation did not happen until 2019](#). International media was quick to highlight the [serious consequences](#) for the LGBTI community in the country, and there were calls to boycott all luxury hotels belonging to a company owned by the Sultan. So far, [no cases](#) against religious minorities (or the LGBTI community) have been reported.

In a major [cabinet reshuffle](#) in June 2022, the Sultan replaced eight ministers. While his own ministerial duties remained unchanged, the change is noteworthy because for the first time since 1958 a woman has been made a full member of the cabinet, in this case as the Minister of Education. There have been deputy and vice-minister positions held by women before, but none as minister.

Ethnically, Malay Bruneians comprise 66% of the population and are presumed to be Muslim. The Chinese population, approximately 10% of the total, is 65% Buddhist and 20% Christian. Christians are free to worship, but they have been warned against doing outreach or becoming too public.

## How the situation varies by region

The country is small and there are no particular areas where Christians face more violations.

<sup>1</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

<sup>2</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

### Historical Christian communities

This includes the Roman Catholic and Anglican Church. They are strictly monitored and must exercise caution, though they experience less pressure than newer Protestant groups and converts.

### Converts to Christianity

Converts from a Muslim background face strong pressure from family and friends, as conversion is considered illegal. Should someone's conversion become known, authorities will step in to bring them back to their original faith.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

Non-traditional Christian communities consist of the Evangelicals and Pentecostals. They are closely watched by the authorities and surrounding community.

## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Islamic oppression, blended with Dictatorial paranoia:

Sharia law in its civil and administrative dimension, was fully implemented even before Brunei's independence in 1984. The government has offered incentives to prospective converts to Islam (especially from indigenous communities) including help with housing and welfare. Family members and neighbors can easily create trouble for converts to Christianity by reporting them to the security department (the KDN), which is frequently happening. A government body, the Malay Islamic Monarchy Supreme Council, seeks to spread MIB philosophy and ensure it is enshrined in the nation's laws and policies. The government offers incentives to prospective converts to Islam, especially those from indigenous communities.



# How are men and women differently affected?

## WOMEN

While Brunei is a signatory country to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), women and religious minorities are under threat from the new Sharia Penal Code. Due to stricter implementation of Islamic laws, Christian women in general should dress modestly, but are not forced to wear a hijab. Women and girls are usually disowned by the family when their conversion becomes known. They may be forced to attend spiritual rehabilitation programs. Sometimes, women are threatened with forced marriage to a Muslim, or if married, may have their children taken away to ensure a Muslim upbringing.

- Denied custody of children
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced marriage
- Forced out of home / expulsion
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

## MEN

Converts to Christianity face the strongest levels of pressure for their faith. Men and boys are usually disowned by their family when they convert and are forced to leave the family home. They also face beatings, humiliation, and harsher treatment when persecuted by religious authorities. Students may

also experience discrimination and verbal abuse in educational settings.

- Forced out of home / expulsion
- Violence – physical
- Violence – verbal

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	46	65
2022	46	64
2021	39	64
2020	37	63
2019	36	63

*This year the score increased by 0.9 points, reflecting a stable but difficult situation for Christians in the country. The pressure on Church life increased the strongest, as limitations of working among youths are strongly felt, especially when it can be understood as proselytization. The average pressure is very high, and the scores remained the same across all spheres of life, while the score for violence remains unchanged as well at a very low level.*

## Examples of violence in the reporting period

- By decree, importing Bibles and any public celebration of Christmas continue to be banned.
- Christian pastors and workers face a multitude of restrictions.
- Both native and foreign Christians have been targets of aggressive Islamization.

WWL Year	Christians forced to marry	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians forced to flee their countries
2023	0	0	5
2022	0	0	10*

*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

Bruneian laws do not allow Malay Muslims to leave Islam, and stipulate that turning away from Islam is punishable by death or a long prison sentence with corporal punishment. A convert to Christianity may not discuss their faith since it can be construed as proselytizing, which is against Sharia law and can be punished with a prison sentence or fine. Christians, especially church leaders, are under permanent surveillance by the authorities.

### Family life

Schools are not allowed to teach about Christianity and all students must study Islam (or rather the national MIB philosophy). Female students must wear a headscarf. Pressure is especially high for children of converts once it is discovered that their parents are “apostates”. The law bans any Muslim from surrendering custody of a minor to a non-Muslim. Therefore, non-Muslims cannot adopt Muslim children or children whose parents are unknown.

### Community life

Islam has permeated every aspect of society, and Christians are under pressure from society and the government to take part in Islamic rites and ceremonies. There are strict regulations and penalties during Ramadan concerning the observance of Muslim prayer times, both for Muslims and non-Muslims. Churches are experiencing a gradual reduction in

membership as people leave for Islam, primarily to avoid social pressure but also for monetary benefits like receiving 1,000 BN\$ per year for 10 years. Islamic missionary (dawah) efforts are widely publicized and celebrated in national newspapers, where converts are announced with their new names.

### National life

With a sedition law in place and MIB and Sharia Penal Code always in the back of their minds, Christians are very careful to self-censor to avoid trouble, especially as it is unclear which statements could be considered seditious. Benefits and promotions are limited to Malays and converts to Islam, if they are citizens, which adds pressure on Christians to convert.

### Church life

Six churches have legal permits, having obtained them during the colonial era. The government does not allow any other churches to be registered. All church activities, especially the content of preaching, are monitored, with registered churches being particularly affected by government informers. These informers are sometimes Christians themselves, who are offered bribes. Pastors are very careful not to say anything that could be interpreted as criticizing or offending the government or the royal family. Published materials are also subject to scrutiny. There is a permanent ban on importing printed religious material.

## International obligations & rights violated

### Brunei has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

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

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

- Brunei citizens are barred from leaving Islam by law and therefore deprived of their right to have or adopt a religion or belief of their choice (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian parents cannot raise their children according to their religious values (CRC Art. 14);
- Christian female converts run the risk of being forcibly married to Muslim men or losing custody of their children (CEDAW Art. 16)

## Situation of other religious minorities

Non-Sunni Muslim groups seen as deviant, such as Shiites and Ahmadis, are banned and persecuted. Atheism is also not allowed. The activities of Hindus have been restricted. The only Hindu temple in the country is located in the British military barracks of the Gurkha regiment. Sikh and Buddhist communities also visit the temple to pray. Chinese residents have been banned from celebrating their new year with the dragon dance. The indigenous Iban community, many of whom are animist, are particularly targeted for Islamic missionary activity (dawah).

The US State Department ([IRFR 2021](#)) report states, “There were reports that some individuals who wished to convert to another religion continued to fear social retribution, such as ostracism by friends, family, and their community. If parents converted to Islam, there was often family and official pressure for the children to do the same if they were not young enough to have been automatically converted with their parents. Some non-Muslims said they continued to feel pressured in the workplace or in social groups to convert to Islam.”



### Open Doors in Brunei

The Church in Brunei is living under Sharia law, which came to effect on 3 April 2019 and applies to all residents, Muslims and non-Muslims, including expats. Therefore, Open Doors calls for increasing prayer support from worldwide Christians for the believers, the local churches, the Sultan and his government officials.

#### 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: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

*Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

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