

WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

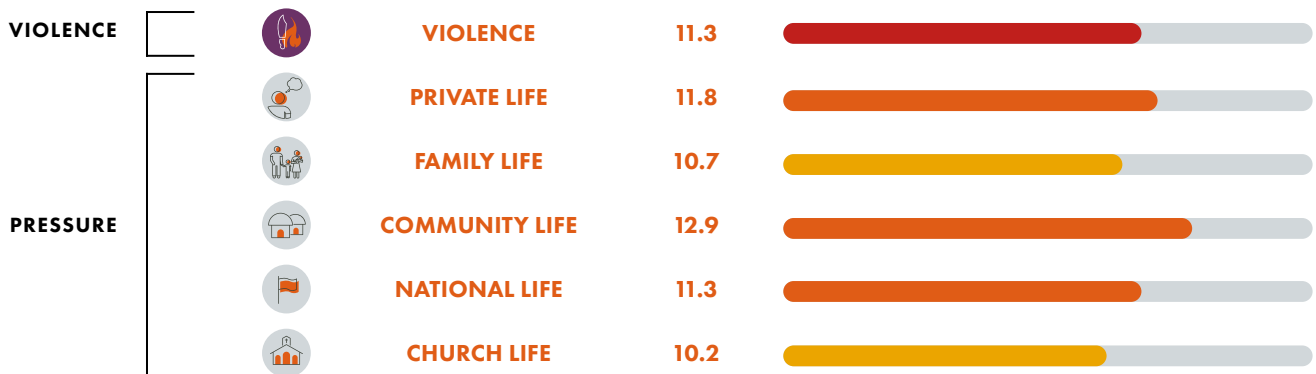
WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
29

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).¹ Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

Key findings

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. Evangelical churches - many of them Pentecostal - 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 like the Santal face an increasing double vulnerability (belonging to both an ethnic and religious minority) and struggle with land-grabbing issues and violence directed against them. Christians among the Muslim Rohingya, who fled to Bangladesh from Myanmar, are facing harassment and strong pressure from their community as well.

¹World Watch Research measures pressure across all spheres of life as well as violence (full methodology [here](#) – password: freedom).

Quick facts

LEADER

President Abdul Hamid

POPULATION

171,500,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

1,103,000 (OD estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Parliamentary Republic



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	1,103,000	0.6
Muslims	152,631,392	89.0
Hindus	15,586,986	9.1
Buddhists	1,246,639	0.7

Source²

Traditionally, relations between the Christian community and government have been good. However, in recent years there has been growing militancy among radical Islamic groups. Despite actions by the government to contain and halt the violence, extrajudicial killings and attacks on human rights activists and religious minorities continue to occur.

Bangladesh is home to over 150 million Muslims, mostly Sunni. Until recently, the country managed to stay clear of the kind of radicalism that has plagued other parts of the world. However, there are definite signs this is changing. Just over 9% of the population is Hindu and they suffer from attacks by radical Muslims. Christians are a tiny minority. They experience marginalization and, if they belong to ethnic minorities, face a double vulnerability. Christian converts come quickly under pressure from either radical Islamic groups or the Islamic culture around them. They face much violence. Churches and all minority religions strive to stay clear of politics, although they notice a growing Islamic conservatism and radicalization in the country.

With the swift takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021, [social media in Bangladesh](#) was awash with praise and thankfulness. Below are just two of thousands of similar reactions by Islamic fundamentalists in Bangladesh, all claiming that finally, Islam has won.

“Go ahead (Taliban), the future world is waiting for you to lead it!”

“I’m so happy to see the victory of Islam before my death. I was never that happy before in my entire life!”

²Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021) (Adapted according to OD-estimate)

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 at the hands of both the Muslim majority and the Buddhist minority. In the last three years, another hotspot developed when Bangladesh became host to more than 700,000 Islamic 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, affecting Bangladesh as well. 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 now 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.

Historical Christian communities

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

Converts to Christianity

Converts are from Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or tribal backgrounds. They face the strongest persecution, not least from their own families and communities, and often gather in groups secretly.

Non-traditional Christian communities

These are from Baptist and Pentecostal communities who 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 Awami League and Bangladesh National Party (BNP). Both parties give in to Islamic groups as a means 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 many Christians find themselves vulnerable in wider Bangladeshi society and are often used as scapegoats. Particularly disconcerting is the opposition party's known ties to radical Islamic groups with a history of political violence. The entry of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees fleeing Myanmar has created additional economic and political strain. The COVID-19 pandemic and related economic situation has furthered Dictatorial Paranoia as well.

Religious nationalism - Buddhism and Hinduism, blended with Ethno-religious hostility and clan oppression:

There are almost twice as many Buddhists and more than 10 times as many Hindus in Bangladesh as Christians. Buddhists are found mostly among the indigenous people groups concentrated in Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts, bordering India and Myanmar. Among these people groups, the tribal Chakma people are the most well-known. Over the past years, an increasing number of Chakma have converted to Christianity. This has caused Buddhist and tribal leaders to put more pressure on converts. This is not only done by family, friends and community, but also by radical Buddhists aiming to strengthen local Buddhist and indigenous groups in resisting Christianity. In majority 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 in particular 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 further be physically and mentally abused. Abduction and forced marriage are a tangible threat facing all Christian women and girls, including in refugee camps. Many girls remain missing and law enforcement has proved inadequate.

- Abduction
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological
- Violence - sexual

MEN

The patriarchal culture in Bangladesh often results in males becoming Christians first, and as leaders within their families, men and boys often face persecution first. They are commonly beaten and threatened, victim to 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. Such economic hardship has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- False charges
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution score out of 100
2022	29	68.04
2021	31	66.69
2020	38	62.98
2019	48	57.73
2018	41	57.68

The WWL 2022 reporting period saw an increase of 1.3 points in comparison to WWL 2021, continuing a trend over recent years. It is the result of an increase in all forms of violence and a slightly higher score in the ‘private’ and ‘family’ spheres of life, since it has been easier for families to watch and restrict converts, as they were mostly confined to their homes due to the pandemic. Christians continue to face discrimination, neglect and violence.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- A 23-year-old Catholic girl was gang-raped and brutally murdered in Rangpur.
- **On 20 December 2020**, a five-year-old boy was murdered with poison by family relative to prevent him from being raised as a Christian, and to disinherit him from the family.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted
2022	2	200	81	5
2021	2	90	143	6

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - see [here](#) for full results. 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 in Bangladesh. 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 often threatened. Within this environment, it can be risky to meet with other Christians due to family pressure and societal monitoring.

Family life

Raising a family according to one’s own religious beliefs can be challenging for Christians. Christian ceremonies are disturbed frequently by mob violence. For young Christians studying in Bangladesh, educational bias for Islamic studies is strong both in terms of opportunities afforded to Islamic students as well as discrimination towards those who stand outside Islamic education. This is especially a problem for parents who are converts. If children are forced to continue attending Islamic classes and use Islamic textbooks, this interferes with the parents’ rights of raising their children according to their beliefs.

Community life

Given their small numbers in Bangladesh, Christian communities are often at the mercy of their surrounding communities in terms of social and economic security. Radical Islamic pressure can encourage wider elements in the community to treat Christians with hostility, encouraging 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 threatening 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.

National life

Article 41(1)(a) of the Bangladesh Constitution protects the citizen’s fundamental right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion. Legally, the conversion process seems very simple: the law requires that the convert goes to a lawyer presenting a written signed document, which states 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 a Muslim, this procedure is almost a formality. In contrast, for a Muslim to become a Christian, it is normal to encounter pressure from the lawyer, who sometimes even refuses (illegally) to register the conversion. As Islam is the state religion and the religion of the vast majority, Muslims who convert to Christianity face strong societal and family pressure in addition to such legal issues.

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 both 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 in 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, and 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's IRF 2020 report](#):

"Members of religious minorities, including Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians, who were sometimes also members of ethnic minorities, stated the government remained ineffective in preventing forced evictions and land seizures stemming from land disputes."

All religious minorities are prone to discrimination and violence, including Islamic minority groups like Shiite and Ahmadi as well as Hindu and Buddhist minorities. There have been calls, still unheeded, to [declare the Ahmadi minority non-Muslim](#). Societal hostility against Ahmadi is far-reaching. In July 2020, radical Muslims [dug up](#) the corpse of a three-day-old Ahmadi girl from a cemetery in the eastern city of Brahmanbaria because she was not Sunni. Hindus are the second largest religious group in the country behind Sunni Muslims. Hindus are subject to discrimination and violence, and some women and girls have been forcefully converted.



Open Doors in Bangladesh

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

- 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: © 2021 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- 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 2022 ranking and reports, can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
