

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

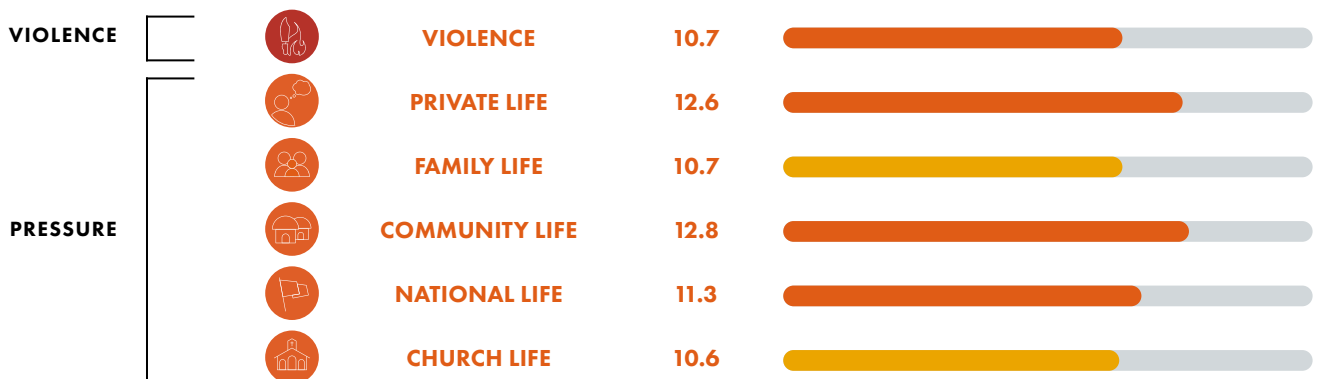
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**30**

## Bangladesh



### 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 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 that work among the Muslim majority, many of them Pentecostal, face persecution. Even historical churches, like the Roman Catholic Church, are increasingly faced with attacks and death threats. Tribal Christians, mostly belonging to the Santal tribe, 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, face harassment and strong pressure from their community as well.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed

### POPULATION

167,886,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

938,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Parliamentary Republic



## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	938,000	0.6
Muslims	149,113,000	88.8
Hindus	15,680,000	9.3
Buddhists	1,221,000	0.7

Source<sup>2</sup>

Traditionally, relations between the Christian community and the 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. In June 2022, the NGO Affairs Bureau, which regulates charities for the Prime Minister's Office, rejected Odhikar's application to renew its registration. The human rights group was accused of publishing misleading information and of tarnishing the country's image. This reasoning is widely seen as trying to get rid of [inconvenient reporting](#) about extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. It illustrates how dangerous it is to call out government injustices, particularly for religious minorities.

## 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 few years,

<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)

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. 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 in groups 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 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 - 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 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 the 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 also 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
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

## MEN

The patriarchal culture in Bangladesh often results in males becoming Christians first, and as perceived leaders within their families, men and boys often also 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. Economic hardship has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- False charges
- Forced to flee town / country
- Imprisonment by the government
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	30	69
2022	29	68
2021	31	67
2020	38	63
2019	48	58

*This reporting period saw a further increase of 0.8 points in comparison to last year, continuing a trend over recent years. This increase in score came from a rise in pressure in the Private and Church spheres of life as families watched and restricted converts even more, as they were mostly confined to their homes due to the pandemic.*



Jatta and Maina's son was martyred for his faith by radical Islamists.

# Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **December 2021:** Two Catholic girls from the Garo minority were raped in Mynmensingh.
- **January 2022:** A 91-year-old Catholic, Malkam d`Costa from Padrishibpur in Barisal, died after being drugged. Five of his family members were also drugged, but survived. His son testified against a Muslim neighbor in a rape case in 2021.
- **September 2022:** A Catholic Christian, Sabuj Bernard Gosal, worker at an apparel factory in Gazipur, was abducted and found murdered a few days later.

WWL Year	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians' private property damaged or confiscated	Christians internally displaced	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed
2023	20	30	230	10
2022	400	135	200	200

*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 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 frequently disrupted by mob violence. For young Christians studying in Bangladesh, the educational bias for Islamic studies is strong, both in terms of opportunities afforded to Islamic students and 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 using Islamic textbooks, this interferes with parents' right to raise 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. 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.

## National life

Article 41(1)(a) of the Bangladesh Constitution protects the citizen's fundamental right to freely profess, practice, and propagate religion. Legally, the conversion process seems very simple: the law requires that the convert visits a lawyer to present 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, Muslims who convert to Christianity face strong societal and family pressure in addition to possible 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, 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 2021 (p.1):**

“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 forced evictions and land seizures stemming from land disputes. The government continued to deploy law enforcement personnel at religious sites, festivals, and events considered possible targets for violence. In response to a Facebook post on October 13 showing a copy of the Quran on the lap of a Hindu god inside a temple, crowds of Muslims attacked Hindu adherents, saying the Quran had been desecrated, and killed between four and 14 individuals, according to media, activists, and official estimates. Crowds also attacked Hindu temples

and property across the country, with violence continuing until October 24. National Hindu leaders said Hindus, afraid of further violence, refrained from public celebrations of Diwali on November 4 in favor of private ceremonies in their temples and homes. Worshipers covered their faces with black cloth to protest the lack of security for Hindus. In June, according to Al-Jazeera, activists from an indigenous (non-Bengali ethnicity) minority group killed a member of their ethnic group for converting to Islam.”





# 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



Monika's husband left her and their three children when she became a Christian. Open Doors provided her with a sewing machine to help her provide for her family.

#### 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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