

World
Watch
Research

Bangladesh: Full Country Dossier

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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Introduction

World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	11	-	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Bangladesh

Brief country details

Bangladesh: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
169,432,000	950,000	0.6

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

Map of country



Bangladesh: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	71	26
WWL 2023	69	30
WWL 2022	68	29
WWL 2021	67	31
WWL 2020	63	38

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Bangladesh: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Dictatorial paranoia	Non-Christian religious leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family, Government officials, Political parties
Islamic oppression	Non-Christian religious leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family, Violent religious groups, Government officials, Political parties
Religious nationalism	Non-Christian religious leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family, Violent religious groups, Government officials, Ethnic group leaders, Political parties, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups
Ethno-religious hostility	Non-Christian religious leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family, Political parties, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, Organized crime cartels or networks, Violent religious groups, Government officials, Ethnic group leaders

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

Bangladesh is one of the few countries in the world where converts to Christian faith originate from four different backgrounds: Converts - whether from a Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or an ethnic/tribal background - face the most severe restrictions, discrimination and attacks in Bangladesh. They often gather in small house-churches or secret groups due to fear of attack. Evangelistic churches - many of them Pentecostal - working among the Muslim majority face persecution, but even historical churches like the Roman Catholic Church are increasingly experiencing 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. The killing of eight tribal Christians on the Thursday before Easter, 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.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

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)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

April 2023: Three churches were attacked, but for security reasons, no details can be provided.

6 April 2023: Eight Bawm tribal Christians were [killed](#) when a gun battle between two insurgent groups took place 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).

Specific examples of positive developments

External Links - Situation in brief

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: killed - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/many-flee-homes-after-8-christians-killed-in-bangladesh/100963>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: destroyed - <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/More-than-a-thousand-Telugu-Christians-evicted-and-abandoned-in-Dhaka-57848.html>

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 Bangladesh report	AI Bangladesh 2022	https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-asia/bangladesh/report-bangladesh/	30 June 2023
BBC News Bangladesh profile - updated 26 May 2023	BBC Bangladesh profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12650940	30 June 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI Bangladesh Report 2022	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/BGD	30 June 2023
CIA World Factbook Bangladesh - updated 26 June 2023	World Factbook Bangladesh	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/bangladesh/	30 June 2023
Crisis24 Morocco report (Garda World)	Crisis24 Morocco report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/bangladesh	30 June 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit Bangladesh profile 2023	EIU Bangladesh profile 2023	https://country.eiu.com/bangladesh	30 June 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 Bangladesh	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	30 June 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Bangladesh not included	Democracy Index 2023	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 Bangladesh	https://freedomhouse.org/country/bangladesh/freedom-world/2023	30 June 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2023 Bangladesh	https://freedomhouse.org/country/bangladesh/freedom-net/2023	28 November 2023
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 Bangladesh profile	https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/bangladesh/	30 June 2023
Girls Not Brides Bangladesh report	Girls Not Brides Bangladesh	https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/bangladesh/	30 June 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 - Bangladesh country chapter	HRW 2023 Bangladesh country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/bangladesh	30 June 2023
Internet World Stats available in 2023	IWS 2023 Bangladesh	https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#bd	30 June 2023
OECD Social Institutions and Gender Index 2019 – covering 180 countries	OECD 2019 Bangladesh	https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/BD.pdf	30 June 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 Bangladesh	https://rsf.org/en/bangladesh	30 June 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2022 Bangladesh	https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/bangladesh	30 June 2023
UNDP: Human Development Report Bangladesh	UNDP HDR Bangladesh	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/BGD	30 June 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Bangladesh	IRFR 2022 Bangladesh	https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bangladesh/	30 June 2023
USCIRF 2023 covering 17 CPC / 11 SWL, Bangladesh not included	USCIRF 2023	https://www.uscifr.gov/countries	
World Bank Bangladesh data 2021	World Bank Bangladesh data	https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=BGD	30 June 2023
World Bank Bangladesh overview – updated 6 April 2023	World Bank Bangladesh overview	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bangladesh/overview	30 June 2023
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook Bangladesh - April 2023	Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 Bangladesh	https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/5d1783db09a0e09d15bbcea8ef0cec0b-0500052021/related/mpo-bgd.pdf	30 June 2023

Recent history

Bangladesh has a long history of unrest and is a relatively young state, achieving independence by war from Pakistan as late as 1971, meaning that it celebrated its 50th anniversary only in 2021. Since independence, civilian governments and military rule have taken turns in power. Elections are regularly accompanied by much violence, with the opposition denounced as having ties with militant Islamic groups and in recent years barely existing anymore. It is feared that the general elections in January 2024 will continue in this tradition.

Bangladesh is entrenched in authoritarian rule since 2015 and has not had an effective parliamentary opposition since the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) boycotted national elections in 2014. Instead of parliamentary debate, 2015 saw the BNP taking to the streets and the government (under Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina) cracking down on free expression

and civil society. Key opposition leaders were arrested, accused of serious offenses, some of which were apparently trumped up. Many remained in hiding, fearing arrest. The elections in December 2018 were not better: At least 17 people across the country were killed and observers reported incidents of vote-rigging, marring the results and disadvantaging the opposition. Sheikh Hasina consequently won her third consecutive term as Prime Minister and does [not need to fear](#) any control from parliament, as her party won an astonishing 96% of the vote; the opposition has thus been effectively wiped out (BBC News, 31 December 2018).

Opposition leader Khaleda Zia and her son were arrested and sentenced in February and October 2018. In March 2020, Zia was [temporarily released](#) on humanitarian (i.e., health) grounds (Benar News, 25 March 2020), the release was [extended](#) several times, most recently in September 2022 (Dhaka Tribune, 18 September 2022). Nevertheless, she still has [several court cases](#) to face (Daily Star, 16 June 2022). This is to make sure she does not return to politics (assuming her state of health made that possible).

Protests in December 2022 showed that there is still [sizeable opposition](#) to the government (CNN, 11 December 2022) and in partial response, the government has been accommodating many of the demands made by conservative Islamic groups, to the detriment of religious minorities such as Christians.

The security forces have committed serious abuses including killings, 'disappearances' and arbitrary arrests, with few investigations or official prosecutions being made. On 10 December 2021, the US Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) Bangladesh's elite paramilitary force, the "Rapid Action Battalion" (RAB), naming some of its officers responsible for human rights violations, a move that led to strong reactions from the government of Bangladesh (Asia Times, 17 January 2022).

The announcement of a change in the [visa process](#) for Bangladeshi nationals put additional pressure on the government and it seems that this policy has been at least partly successful (The Diplomat, 1 July 2023; see also below: *Trends analysis #2*).

Christians are not normally active in politics and try not to get too involved in political matters, but of course they find themselves in the same polarized political situation and face the heavy-handedness of the authorities and security services like everybody else. As a religious minority, they are even more vulnerable since they lack sources of support and political ties; hence they can easily be used as scapegoats.

Political and legal landscape

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. The series of killings ceased, but political violence continues, between (but also within) parties, although it rarely affects Christians. According to Human Rights organizations like [Odhikar](#), extra-judicial killings as well as lynchings are on the rise (Odhikar, Annual Report 2021, 31 January 2022). 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 (Amnesty International, 7 June 2022). In September 2023, the founders of human rights organization Odhikar have each been [sentenced](#) to two years' imprisonment by the Dhaka Cyber Tribunal (Benar News, 14 September 2023). Their crime goes back to June 2013 when they violated a now-defunct internet law by publicizing a high death toll caused during an overnight operation by security forces to clear a demonstration by conservative Muslim activists who were blocking a commercial zone in Dhaka.

Another sign of growing authoritarianism and *Dictatorial paranoia* in Bangladesh was the [shutting down](#) of the country's largest opposition newspaper, a decision upheld by the Press Council in January (The Guardian, 20 February 2023). This was possibly in reaction to the international scrutiny the RAB has come under. [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 the international pressure including [sanctions](#) are helping to remind the government and security forces that they are under scrutiny and will be held accountable (Lowy Institute, 26 January 2023).

The way Bangladesh elected a [new president](#) (Benar News, 13 February 2023), shows that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is confident and her party's ranks are loyal. The president was not actually 'elected' by the parliament, according to the constitutional procedure, but rather 'acclaimed'. Not surprisingly, he is a close ally of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, but instead of his selection being voted in by parliament, the MPs were simply asked if they trusted the PM to pick the right candidate and this was accepted.

The government is struggling to fight the radical Islamic groups which are growing stronger in influence, adding to the general insecurity. In her election campaign, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina appeared to be wooing conservative Islamic circles in her speech at a gathering of madrassas in November 2018, by stating: "Anyone who pronounces offensive comments against [Islam] or against the Prophet Muhammad, will be prosecuted according to the law", and by pointing out that the [religion of the country is Islam](#) (Asia News, 5 November 2018). At the same time, she stated that there is no room for Islamic militancy in Bangladesh.

It remains to be seen how her government will walk this tightrope in the years to come, especially as this statement was given at a meeting hosted by an association of conservative Qawmi madrassas, whose degrees the government recognizes as being equal with a [Master's degree](#) (BDNews24, 13 August 2018). The [death](#) of the leader of Islamist organization Hefazat-e-Islami in September 2020 saw the group shift their political alliances taking a more radical stance against the government (Benar News, 21 September 2020). A red line was crossed when Hefazat-e-Islami called for demonstrations against the visit of India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, who came as an official guest of honor to the celebrations of Bangladesh's 50th anniversary in March 2021. Thousands clashed with police across the country and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced that the state would deal severely with all groups calling for violence. As a result, the authorities [arrested](#) almost a thousand members of Hefazat-e-Islami,

among them 21 leaders (The Diplomat, 19 May 2021). At the same time, it is highly unlikely that the government will revive plans to [return to the purely secular](#) constitution of 1972, although one minister did refer to plans to do this (The Print India, 25 October 2021). Thus, the government's and society's commitment to secularism remains [shaky](#) (The Diplomat, 6 December 2021).

Although the state has had some success in its struggle against radical Islamic groups and their activities, new groups are emerging while others are going underground (see below: *Security situation*). This complicated situation leaves Christians as a religious minority vulnerable and the surprise killing of a Christian woman and her daughter in May 2020 shows that attacks can happen without any warning or apparent reason.

Gender perspective

Despite its female leadership, Bangladesh's laws remain largely discriminatory towards women and girls. Under Muslim and Hindu laws, women and men do not enjoy the same marriage rights. For example, polygamy is permitted for men but not for women. Child marriage is an area of particular concern, with 51% of girls married by 18. Whilst the minimum legal age is 18 years for girls, the Child Marriage Restraint Act (2017) includes loopholes that allow child marriage in "special cases" (Girls Not Brides Bangladesh). In a [2016 Periodic Report](#), the CEDAW committee criticized Bangladesh for failing to outlaw marital rape and for not providing adequate pathways to justice for victims of crimes. Divorce laws (which vary in accordance with the religious or civil law that the marriage occurred under) largely favor men, trapping women in abusive relationships. Under Sharia law, men can divorce their wives by *talaq* – a husband's right to dissolve the marriage by a verbal or written repudiation his wife – whereas women must go to court ([Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961](#)). There is no provision for divorce under Hindu law.

Religious landscape

Bangladesh: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	950,000	0.6
Muslim	150,497,000	88.8
Hindu	15,791,000	9.3
Buddhist	1,241,000	0.7
Ethno-religionist	750,000	0.4
Jewish	200	0.0
Bahai	13,400	0.0
Atheist	14,100	0.0
Agnostic	142,000	0.1
Other - includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.	33,490	0.0

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

Home to more than 150 million Muslims (according to WCD 2023 estimates), mostly Sunni, up until recently Bangladesh managed to stay clear of the kind of radicalism that has plagued other parts of the world and South Asia. However, there are definite signs that this is changing. The government's decision in January 2017 to make its [school textbooks](#) more suitable for conservative Islamic groups is one sign in this respect (New York Times, 22 January 2017). By having the letter 'o' now explained by depicting a devout Muslim girl's "orna" (a scarf worn at the beginning of puberty) is just one example of a creeping Islamic drive beginning in textbooks for first-graders. A textbook for sixth-graders replaced a trip report to the north of India (a neighboring country) with a report about the Nile in Egypt. Other books have changed as well, for example in no longer using Hindu or Christian-sounding first names. However, this new drive is not supporting violence: The government decided to [ban chapters on jihad](#) in secondary-school textbooks (UCA News, 27 October 2017).

In May 2018, the ruling Awami League accepted a 1 billion USD financial package from Saudi Arabia for building [560 mosques](#) across the country (UCA News, 16 May 2018). As the funding did not materialize, the state of Bangladesh stepped in, a fact which led Catholic leaders to ask for [equal funding](#) of all religious institutions and buildings (UCA News, 11 June 2021). The building program has been marred by [rising costs](#) and delays, but it is now scheduled to be completed in 2024 (Daily Star, 7 December 2021).

Just over 9% of the population is Hindu and they suffer from attacks carried out by radical Muslims as well. Buddhists and ethnic religions complete the mix of religions in Bangladesh, and although small in number, converts from these religions can come under strong pressure from their families and community. Members of the ethnic minorities and indigenous people groups claim that there has been [significant undercounting](#) of their numbers in the most recent census conducted in June 2022 (UCA News, 11 August 2022). Indigenous groups in various parts of the country complained that the enumerators 'didn't bother to visit their homes to include them'. Even if undercounted, Christians are a tiny minority, experience marginalization and, if they belong to ethnic minorities, face a double vulnerability. Christian converts from all backgrounds come quickly under pressure from either radical Islamic groups or their respective neighborhoods. They are facing much violence. Churches and all minority religions tend to stay clear of politics; however, they notice a growing Islamic conservatism and radicalization in the country and Christian and other minorities are running several lobby groups.

Economic landscape

According to UNDP HDR Bangladesh:

- **Gross National Income:** 4,976 USD (2017 PPP USD)
- **Rate of multidimensional poverty:** The rate of people living in multidimensional poverty is 24.6%, the rate of people vulnerable to it is 18.2%. 24.3% of the people are living below the national poverty line
- **Remittances:** These make up 6.07% of the total GDP

According to World Bank Bangladesh data:

- Bangladesh is classified as a lower-middle income country

- **GDP per capita (PPP constant 2017 international USD):** 5,911
- **GDP per capita growth rate:** 5.7%
- **Poverty gap at 6.85 USD a day (2017 PPP):** 42% (2016)

As summarized by World Bank Bangladesh overview:

- "Bangladesh has a strong track record of growth and development, even in times of elevated global uncertainty. A robust demographic dividend, strong ready-made garment (RMG) exports, resilient remittance inflows, and stable macroeconomic conditions have supported rapid economic growth over the past two decades. Bangladesh tells a remarkable story of poverty reduction and development. From being one of the poorest nations at birth in 1971, Bangladesh reached lower-middle income status in 2015. It is on track to graduate from the UN's Least Developed Countries (LDC) list in 2026. Poverty declined from 41.9 percent in 1991 to 13.5 percent in 2016, based on the international poverty line of \$2.15 a day (using 2017 Purchasing Power Parity exchange rate). Moreover, human development outcomes improved along many dimensions."

At the same time, Bangladesh is ranked as one of the world's most corrupt places, taking the 147th of 180 places in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI 2022 Bangladesh). Its political system has repeatedly been jolted by instability. And yet, the country could become the only upper-middle income economy in South Asia by 2031 (the pre-COVID-19 estimations had indicated 2024). A key driver of the economy has been the country's \$26 billion clothing industry, which accounts for around 80% of its exports. As with other countries in a similar situation, Bangladesh has accepted infrastructure projects and other assistance from China, however, as far as can be seen, without yet becoming economically dependent on the country. As the economy has grown, the number of Bangladeshis living in poverty has fallen and social indicators have improved, with the government putting money into initiatives to empower women and improve food security. A remark made by the Chinese envoy which could be read as warning Bangladesh against joining the US-led "Quad" (a strategic partnership between the USA, India, Japan and Australia) was immediately rebuked by state authorities and the country's [autonomy](#) stressed (Benar News, 11 May 2021).

But serious challenges remain: Bangladesh's territory is deeply vulnerable to the forces of nature, as could be seen by super-cyclone Amphan devastating parts of the country in May 2020 and the subsequent [heavy flooding](#), inundating a third of the country (The Guardian, 24 July 2020). The heavy flooding in May and June 2022 affecting [more than 4.6 million people](#) was a reminder that these challenges persist and - according to the WHO - could increase if predicted climatic changes occur (WHO, 23 June 2022). Further major flooding [occurred](#) in August 2023 in the north of the country, affecting 2.4 million people (ReliefWeb, 13 August 2023).

Despite its status as a developing country, Bangladesh took in almost one million Rohingya refugees in a very short period of time (from 2017 onwards), making Cox's Bazar the largest refugee camp in the world. This has brought many additional economic and social difficulties, as seen in this project summary published by the [World Bank](#) (World Bank, Results Brief, 26 October 2022):

- "By the mid-2010s, although enrollment and gender parity rates improved at both primary and secondary levels, Bangladesh still faced a persistently high adult functional illiteracy rate at over 50 percent and low education completion rates. Around five million children aged six to 13 remained out of school mostly in under-served areas and urban slums. In addition, from 2017, following an ethnic conflict in Myanmar, about a million displaced Rohingya people moved to camps in Bangladesh's southeastern Cox's Bazar district, more than 350,000 of them children requiring urgent educational and psychosocial support. The influx created further pressure on the already stretched local economy and social services, resulting in a further increase in school dropout rates and disengaged youth, especially girls and young women, in the hosting community."

The COVID-19 crisis put all economic progress in jeopardy and it may take longer for Bangladesh to recover than for other countries. Millions of workers in the clothing industry and state-run mills were laid off in a country with no social security net, although the state did pour out financial assistance. The timing of natural disasters striking right after a three-month lockdown in May 2020 added to the difficulties. Christians, who often belong to the poorer parts of society, will feel these harder socio-economic times even more, especially those belonging to the ethnic minorities.

At the same time, and as a vivid reminder of how resilient Bangladesh can be, the opening of the [Padma bridge](#) on 25 June 2022 showed that the country is able to finance large infrastructure projects on its own (Voice of America, 25 June 2022). The almost 3.9 billion USD were completely financed by Bangladesh, though planned and constructed with Chinese support. The government accused Nobel laureate Mohammed Yunus to be behind the withdrawal of World Bank [financing](#), a claim that was immediately rejected (Benar News, 1 July 2022). The inauguration of South Asia's largest [tunnel project](#), the Bangabandhu tunnel, is set for September 2023 (Dhaka Tribune, 26 April 2023). In an effort to strengthen regional cooperation and potentially more important for its partner, Bangladesh announced to [open three of its ports](#) to be used by Bhutan to facilitate trade with other countries (Reuters, 23 March 2023).

In a groundbreaking deal, boosting regional connectivity in South Asia, Bangladesh, India and Nepal signed a contract by which [hydroelectricity](#) produced by Nepal will be exported to Bangladesh, via the Indian power grid (Nikkei Asia, 25 June 2023). This could help stabilize the country's energy demands, but it remains to be seen if it will also benefit the poorer parts of society.

Gender perspective

Against the fragile economic background outlined above, women remain the most economically vulnerable, in part due to low education rates, patrilineal inheritance laws and fewer employment opportunities. More and more women have been empowered to join the workforce. The female [labor force participation rate](#) in Bangladesh increased from 36.3% in 2018 to 42.7% in 2022 (The Business Standard, 29 March 2023). Greater parity has been achieved in the context of education, with secondary school enrolment rising from 39% in 1998 for girls, to 93.7% in 2021 ([World Economic Forum, March 2021](#)). This contributes towards reduced economic dependency of women on men, although experts note that these dynamics can in themselves be exploited, with male relatives taking their earnings and pressur-

izing them to earn more ([TRT, 15 November 2017 broadcast, 17.15 onwards](#)). Whilst female Christian converts struggle to gain economic independence, male Christian converts (typically the primary financial provider) find themselves unable to provide at all, should they lose their job.

Social and cultural landscape

According to UNDP HDR Bangladesh and World Factbook Bangladesh:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Bengali at least 98.9%, indigenous ethnic groups 1.1% (2011 est.). Among those groups are Meitei, Tripura, Marma, Tanchangya, Barua, Khasi, Santals, Chakma, Rakhine, Garo, Bihari, Oraon, Munda and Rohingya. The state recognizes 27 ethnic minorities, and there are estimations that up to 75 minorities may live in Bangladesh.
- **Main languages:** Bangla 98.8% (official, also known as Bengali), other 1.2% (2011 est.)
- **Urbanization rate:** 40.5%
- **Literacy rate:** 74.9% (of ages 15 and above)
- **Mean years of schooling:** 6.2 years (for girls: 5.7 years, compared to 6.9 years for boys).
- **Health and education indicators:** Per 10,000 people, Bangladesh has 5.8 physicians and 8 hospital beds. The pupil teacher ratio in elementary school is 30:1.

According to World Bank Bangladesh data:

- **Population/Age:** 26.2% of the population is under 14 years old, 5.8% is above 65 (2021).
- **Education:** The completion rate for primary education is 122%.
- **Unemployment:** 4.7%; the rate of vulnerable employment is 53.9% (modeled ILO estimate).
- **IDPs/Refugees:** The [ILO](#) estimates that annually at least 400,000 people are leaving Bangladesh for overseas employment; other [estimates](#) are higher, ranging between 600,000 and 700,000 (The Business Standard, 20 March 2022). In Bangladesh, migration focused on the Rohingya refugees from Myanmar and - according to the 31 May 2023 [UNHCR Factsheet](#) - 961,175 Rohingya refugees are living in Bangladesh, 931,125 in Cox's Bazaar district and 30,050 in Bhasan Char.

According to the UNDP HDR Bangladesh:

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a score of 0.632, Bangladesh ranks #133 out of 189 countries, in the group of countries with "medium human development". The country enjoyed a very fast growth, which only recently decreased slightly.
- **Life expectancy:** 72 years
- **Median age:** 27.9 years.
- **GINI coefficient:** 32.4 (2016)
- **Gender inequality:** On the Gender Inequality Index, Bangladesh has a score of 0.537 and ranks 133rd of 162 listed countries. The labor force participation rate is 36.3% for women, compared to 81.4% for men.

Bangladesh is densely populated: It is the world's eighth most populous nation with close to 170 million people, the third most populous Muslim nation after Indonesia and Pakistan and has the highest population density behind some city and island states. It is still among the world's poorest, despite remarkable progress in recent years.

Despite all the economic growth, income distribution is unequal, and poverty is still a big problem. This inequality was already pronounced before the COVID-19 crisis struck, but it was feared that the consequences of the pandemic would push [more than 16 million people](#) back into poverty in 2020 (Asia News, 25 July 2020). Although numbers are still hard to come by, millions of clothing and other workers lost their employment and this put the rural areas under a double problem: Families in rural areas had normally been able to survive economically due to receiving remittances sent back by family members working in the cities - however, these funds were not available anymore.

Literacy and education continue to be a [major challenge](#) for Bangladesh and even when the school enrolment figures are high, so is the number of 'drop-outs', even at primary school level (18%). The drop-out rate is 30% at the secondary level (UCA News, 8 September 2020). According to a more recent report, the overall [school drop out rate](#) was 17% in 2021, and it is climbing due to climate change reasons (WEF, 17 May 2022).

The approximately one million Muslim Rohingya refugees from neighboring Myanmar had already been putting the country's economy and social fabric under enormous strain since 2018, especially in the district of Cox's Bazar (see below: *Security situation*). This pressure will not ease swiftly. In a very positive development, Bangladesh's authorities announced at the end of January 2020 that they would [provide formal education](#) for Rohingya refugee children, in cooperation with UNICEF (Reuters, 29 January 2020). But these programs were affected by the COVID-19 restrictions as well and the process of (voluntarily) [re-locating refugees](#) to a camp located on an island named Bhashan Char, which observers describe as "flood-prone", created a lot of anxiety in the refugee community (Reuters, 4 December 2020). However, it was visited by UN officials in May 2021 and basically [endorsed](#) for relocating up to 100,000 people (Benar News, 2 June 2021). As per [ECHO Factsheet Bangladesh](#) (updated 1 February 2023) approximately 30,000 Rohingya refugees are currently hosted on the island.

According to World Christian Database's April 2023 estimates, just under 89% of the country's population is Muslim. While Bangladesh is largely ethnically homogenous - with 98% of the population being Bengali - minorities like the Chakma exist as well. Additionally, there are the so called "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 recurrent 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.

Gender perspective

Men and women in Bangladesh are expected to assume traditional gender roles; reflecting this, over 50% of men in Bangladesh think it is unacceptable for women to have paid work (GIWPS 2021 Bangladesh). It is extremely challenging for both male and female converts to Christianity to find acceptance within their families and communities; conversion is viewed as a betrayal of the national religion and culture. Men often convert first and are beaten for betraying their religion and culture. Women too face physical violence and are commonly sexually assaulted. There is broad societal acceptance of gender-based violence. The UN Global Database on

Violence against Women (UN, 2023) indicates that [54.2%](#) of married women have experienced some form of intimate partner abuse (dowry-related violence is particularly prevalent). Sexual violence against children is also endemic in Bangladesh. There were more than 800 incidents of sexual abuse against female children in the first eight months of 2021 ([The Daily Star, 29 August 2022](#)), and the actual number is estimated to be much higher as cases of rape, particularly against female children with disabilities, are often [underreported](#) (The Leaflet, 21 April 2023). Only 3% of victims take legal action, reflecting how notoriously difficult it is for victims to access justice and the social stigma attached to sexual violence.

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (ISW 2023 Bangladesh):

- **Internet usage:** 77.2% penetration - survey date: July 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 35.3% penetration – survey date: July 2022

According to the World Bank country profile:

- **Mobile phones:** The subscription rate is 109 per 100 people.

The Internet penetration rate is listed as 15.0% by UNDP's HDI data. According to the GSMA Intelligence group ([Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023](#)), there is a gender gap in relation to mobile phone ownership and internet usage; 67% of women own a mobile phone compared to 84% of men (p.17). This gap is suspected to be much wider in rural areas.

Lack of family approval was identified as one of the primary barriers for women regarding phone ownership. The study further reveals that men and women have an equal awareness of mobile internet services. Social media is becoming a platform for raising awareness and calling for swift government action towards gender-based violence (GBV), exemplified in the conviction of those who killed a student who publicly accused her schoolteacher of sexual harassment ([BBC News, 24 October 2019](#)).

According to Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 Bangladesh:

- Bangladesh registered a decline in freedom and is considered "partly free", dropping two points in the Freedom on the Net index. Describing the general situation, the report states: "Online activists and journalists encountered increasing levels of physical violence and supporters of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) faced an ongoing crackdown. Internet and communications services were throttled several times ahead of BNP rallies. Authorities continued to target opposition leaders, journalists, government critics, and ordinary users under the Digital Security Act (DSA), fueling self-censorship online. The government's control of the digital environment is expected to tighten thanks to proposed regulations and amendments to existing laws related to digital content, online news, and data protection."
- "While social media platforms, communications apps, and other digital tools generally remain accessible to users who wish to mobilize and campaign, the government has restricted connectivity and blocked platforms during protests. Enhanced surveillance, arrests, and targeted violence also limit people's willingness to mobilize online."

- "News reports indicate that Dhaka is expanding its surveillance capacity. In January 2023, Haaretz reported that the NTMC had acquired Spearhead, a vehicle-mounted surveillance system sold by Cyprus-registered firm Passitora. Spearhead can monitor targets within a radius of 500 meters, intercept encrypted messages and chats, including those on social media platforms, and inject spyware into mobile phones or computers. A unit that can reportedly intercept data, including encrypted messages and chats, was delivered to Dhaka in June 2022."
- "Despite the rapid growth of internet infrastructure in Bangladesh, disparities persist. Issues related to affordability and service quality prevent many from accessing the internet, particularly rural populations and those with fewer socio-economic opportunities. A gender gap, especially regarding mobile connectivity, remains a pressing issue. Users have complained about cost, affordability, and quality in rural areas, where about 61 percent of the population lives. According to a government survey released in November 2022, 29.7 percent of rural households had access to the internet, via fixed-line or mobile networks, compared to 63.4 percent of urban households. Among all survey participants, 48.2 percent cited the cost of service as a barrier to access, and 34.9 percent cited the specific cost of internet equipment."

According to a media report, the Digital Security Act (passed in October 2018) has enabled the authorities to [block access](#) to more than 18,000 Internet sites (UCA News, 1 March 2019). This process of blocking websites has highlighted some interesting things to note:

- It has shown what potential power lies behind this digital security law.
- It indicates how conservative the government is becoming.
- It has the welcome side-effect of acting as a tool for wooing Islamic groups into supporting the government.

Human Rights Watch reported about and [protested](#) against this government policy in January 2020 (Human Rights Watch, 8 January 2020). The [two-day blocking](#) of Radio Free Asia's sister site, Benar News, in March 2020 shows that the government is determined to control political narratives (Benar News, 4 April 2020). As of February 2020, since the Digital Security Act came into law, [more than 2000 cases](#) have been opened against alleged perpetrators, often journalists (DW, 3 March 2021). This shows another effect of the law - it will increase levels of self-censorship and fear about reporting. An example of this in the WWL 2024 reporting period came when the government arrested a journalist and filed a [case against the editor](#) of the country's leading newspaper, Prothom Alo, under the Digital Security Act, for allegedly "undermining the country's independence" (Benar News, 30 March 2023). The report, which was published on Bangladesh's Independence Day, quoted a worker as saying: "What is the meaning of independence when we cannot manage food. ...We need independence guaranteeing fish, meat and rice." At a press conference, the Information Minister confirmed that this report had indeed undermined the country's independence.

Security situation

A dangerous challenge to the Muslim-majority nation is the threat of radical Islamic violence. Police have claimed that most of the suspects behind recent attacks have been members of Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) - a banned Islamist group. In many cases, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group (IS) have taken credit for attacks and threatened more, as in a video released in [Summer 2019](#) (Benar News, 12 August 2019).

The government of Sheikh Hasina has repeatedly played down the threat from transnational Islamic militants, blaming home-grown Islamic radicals linked to the political opposition instead. There is no clear consensus on the veracity of the claims, even amongst the region's top analysts on terrorism. It is indeed true that the opposition has had close links with right-wing Islamists in the past, but if this analysis still holds true, now that the opposition is in disarray, remains unclear. At the end of July 2020, there were reports that members of the Neo-JMB, the group which attacked Holey Artisan Café in 2016, were [planning another attack](#) for Eid al-Adha (UCA News, 28 July 2020), but this did not happen. While the authorities say the terror threat is [under control](#) five years after this major attack, not all experts are so sure about that (Benar News, 29 June 2021). Over the course of 2021, more than 40 militants from [Ansar al-Islam Bangladesh](#) (AIB) were arrested. AIB is the official arm of al-Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent and both celebrated and supports the taking over of power by the Taliban in Afghanistan (Jamestown Foundation, 25 February 2022). There are also reports that several radical groups (or remnants of them after government action) are unifying and consolidating their [efforts](#) under the name of *Jamaatul Ansar* (Jamestown Foundation, 26 June 2023). Even though this does not mean they will be able to strike immediately, it shows that violent Islamic groups are here to stay in Bangladesh.

The radicalization of [women in Bangladesh](#) has been used not only to spread IS propaganda but also as a weapon of attack by the already mentioned JMB (Jamestown Foundation, 12 February 2021). One of the reasons why women are being instrumentalized for attacks, is that they are still less likely to be suspected and searched by the authorities or security personnel. This confirms a trend which has already been observed for several years in Southeast Asia, especially in attacks in the Philippines and in Indonesia, most prominently in the attacks against churches in Surabaya in 2018.

The large number of predominantly Muslim refugees from Myanmar has been a challenge for the authorities, but so far radicalization and violence has been largely confined to the refugee camps. The International Court of Justice ordered that Myanmar carry out [provisional measures](#) to protect the Rohingya minority (New York Times, 23 January 2020), but it is hardly probable that any repatriation will take place since the erstwhile ruling NLD in Myanmar was ousted by a [military coup](#) at the beginning of February 2021 (Vox, 2 February 2021) and the civil war in Myanmar is continuing unabated. Consequently, the Rohingya refugees are facing what one report called "[A long road ahead](#)" (International Crisis Group, 22 August 2022). The longer refugees are confined to the camps without any future perspectives, the more likely problems such as [organized crime and Islamic radicalization](#) will spread (Jamestown Foundation, 6 January 2023).

On the one hand, Christians benefit from the generally stronger action taken by the authorities against radical Islamic groups such as Hefazat-e-Islami (see above: *Political and legal landscape*; and below: *Trends analysis*) and the reduction in killings. On the other hand, security for Christians remains fragile as attacks can come from different sources. Additionally - and in the WWL 2024 reporting period this involved a high-profile attack - there is the situation of the Chittagong Hill Tribes, among whom there is a significant minority of Christians. The situation can best be described by the term one observer used - "[elusive peace](#)" (International-LaCroix, 7 December 2019). Land disputes against ethnic minority Christians continue and this can translate into violence. Christians also lose their livelihood by such attacks, as was illustrated when Betel nut fields were [destroyed](#) in June 2021 (UCA News, 2 June 2021). Finally, the few Christians among the Rohingya refugees suffered from [attacks and](#) abductions at the end of January 2020 (Asia News, 4 February 2020). Their security situation may arguably be the worst of all Christians in Bangladesh.

Gender perspective

Rohingya women's and girls' experiences of displacement are particularly challenging due to societal and cultural norms which restrict their freedom, and widespread gender-based violence exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic ([International Rescue Committee, May 2020](#)). Abduction remains a significant threat for Christian women and children, including in refugee camps, according to a Human Rights Watch report ([HRW, 13 February 2020](#)). This occurs typically for the purpose of forced marriage, trafficking or sexual violence.

Trends analysis

1) Islamist mindset is growing while government's position is ambivalent at best

After the Awami League consolidated its one-party rule, not least by limiting the freedoms of opinion and press and strongly acting against any dissent and thus showing increasingly signs of Dictatorial paranoia, it first tried to appease some Muslim conservative groups, especially Hefazat-e-Islami. Prime Minister Hasina had seen it necessary before the December 2018 elections to state: "Anyone who pronounces offensive comments against [Islam] or against the Prophet Muhammad, will be prosecuted according to the law" (emphasizing that the [religion of the country is Islam](#)), which was a rather discouraging message for the future of the Christian minority in Bangladesh (Asia News, 5 November 2018). The new leadership of Hefazat-e-Islami has close ties with [the opposition](#) BNP and challenged the government. After fierce protests against erecting statues of the nation's founder and the visit of India's Narendra Modi as a guest of honor for the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh (referred to above in: *Political and legal landscape*), the authorities [cracked down hard](#) on the organization and its leadership (The Diplomat, 17 May 2021). However, observers say that the government [continues to accommodate](#) Islamist groups at the expense of religious minorities such as Hindus and Christians (East Asia Forum, 16 February 2022), who face a growing Islamic conservatism in society.

Student protests in Bangladesh have revealed a [mindset](#) which is shifting towards increasing Islamic conservatism (Daily Star, 30 August 2022). When a 22-year-old female student wearing Western clothes was assaulted by a group of youths at a railway station, this incident, caught on

CCTV, went viral on social media and caused much debate throughout Bangladesh. Students from four universities mounted protests against women having the right to choose their own clothing, some going so far as to claim: 'Women who destroy national culture by adapting a western lifestyle are cultural terrorists'. During the court hearing for one of the perpetrators of the assault at the Narsingdi railway station, the High Court seems to have sided with a restrictive approach to this right of choosing one's own clothing by saying: 'Do people not have the right to preserve their heritage, culture and tradition? Is clothing not a part of culture?' This argument is all the more dangerous if it is used to justify violence or play down its seriousness. It is therefore not surprising to note that although large-scale attacks in Bangladesh appear to have ceased for the moment, [radical Islamic influences](#) remain a challenge (USIP, 23 June 2022).

2) Government authoritarianism is growing

As already explained in detail above (see: *Recent history*), since 2015 and even more pronounced since the 2018 elections, Bangladesh has slowly been sliding into authoritarian rule. Apart from banning the internationally well-respected human rights organization Odhikar, banning the largest opposition-aligned newspaper and the actions against Prothom Alo, referred to above, testify to a hardening dictatorial mindset. And even if the cases do not result in convictions, they will intimidate reporters and editors and make them think twice before publishing anything the government might deem critical.

One observer quoted the findings of the V-Dem index for illustrating how Bangladesh is sliding into [authoritarianism](#): "Bangladesh is creeping toward authoritarianism under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who has ruled for nearly 14 years. In 2021, the V-Dem Institute, a democracy research organization, categorized the country alongside Hungary, India, Turkey, the USA, and others as examples of democracies that were 'autocratizing'. Some of the classic markers of authoritarianism are easily discernable in Bangladesh; power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of Hasina, and the legislature is dominated by the ruling party, which has also established a firm grip over the civil administration and law enforcement agencies." (Foreign Affairs, 29 April 2022) The [arrest of several opposition leaders](#) after a protest of tens of thousands of opposition supporters in December 2022 does not bode well for Bangladesh's democracy (CNN, 11 December 2022), especially as general elections are due in January 2024. A junior minister called [criticism by the European Parliament](#) in September 2023 an act of interference, saying: 'We will take it into cognizance and not sit idle if there is any propaganda against Bangladesh'.

While a majority of respondents to a survey said that the country is heading in the "wrong direction", 70% said that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was doing a good job (USIP, 9 August 2023). It can be seen as an encouraging sign that the opposition Bangladesh National Party was able to hold a series of rallies in several cities and districts across the country in May 2023 [undisturbed](#) and without violence (Bangladesh Pratidin, 13 May 2023). Likewise, Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami party was allowed to hold its first [rally](#) for ten years in June 2023 and demand that the upcoming elections be held under a caretaker government (Prothom Alo, 11 June 2023). While this led to speculations about the future alignment of the party, the fact that the rallies were held peacefully is in itself encouraging, although it will not influence election results deci-

sively. The closer the January 2024 election date comes, the more violence is being reported in political rallies, e.g. in [deadly clashes](#) in October 2023 (Benar News, 31 October 2023).

3) Consequences for the Christian minority - a very high level of persecution, resulting from a mixture of persecution engines and drivers

The persecution of Christians in Bangladesh is at a very high level (very high being defined in WWL methodology when a country scores 61-80 points) and shows a variety of actors and Christians affected, especially converts from various religious backgrounds. The situation is particularly serious for Christian converts from a Muslim background. Although since 2016 no major attacks have taken place, Islamic radical groups and their ideology are growing in influence, while an increasingly authoritarian government has consistently denied any IS presence in the country. Even if this were true, responsibility for attacks was also claimed by local Islamist groups. However, the events unfolding in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in April 2023 were a sad reminder that Islamist groups are not the only drivers of murder and havoc for Christians.

Christians, especially outside the CHT, continue to live in fear of possible attacks by Islamists, although the immediate threat has decreased somewhat due to a concerted crackdown on some radical Islamic groups by the authorities. Death-threats are still being issued against pastors, but not as widely as before. Forced marriage, rape, discrimination in the distribution of public resources and mob attacks against Christians are all increasingly common. An additional challenge is the situation in the Rohingya refugee camps, where radical groups have started to emerge.

The situation for ethnic minority Christians remains difficult: The continuing cases of land-grabbing (with virtually no support for the Christians from the authorities) often result in whole Christian families and communities losing their livelihoods. Additionally, the reported serious undercount of ethnic minority numbers in the June 2022 census (see above: *Religious landscape*) shows how the marginalization of Bangladesh's ethnic minorities has become institutionalized by the government.

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WWL 2024: Church information / Bangladesh

Christian origins

Christianity made its first definite inroads into the region now called Bangladesh in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Portuguese traders and Roman Catholic missionaries reached its shores close to the city of Chittagong, in what was then called “Bengal Sultanate”, and built its first churches. The renowned Baptist missionary, William Carey, arrived at Serampore in West Bengal in 1793. This Englishman heralded a new missionary era in Bengal, translating and printing the Bible in Bengali and the first dictionary of the Bengali language. He also helped develop Bengali typefaces for printing and established Serampore Mission and College besides publishing newspapers and periodicals. The school system in Bangladesh is indebted to William Carey’s work. With Carey came the Baptist Missionary Society (British) in 1793, followed by Church Missionary Society (British) in 1805, Council for World Mission (British Presbyterian) in 1862, Australian Baptist Mission in 1882, New Zealand Baptist Mission in 1886, Oxford Mission (British Anglican) in 1895, Churches of God (American) in 1905, Seventh-Day Adventists in 1919, Assemblies of God in 1945, Santal Mission (Lutheran) in 1956, Bangladesh Mission of the Southern Baptist Convention (American) in 1957, and Association of Baptists for World Evangelism (American) in 1958. After the War of Independence in 1971, there was an influx of more Protestant missionary societies in Bangladesh.

Church spectrum today

Bangladesh: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	160	0.0
Catholic	438,000	46.1
Protestant	364,000	38.3
Independent	316,000	33.3
Unaffiliated	3,000	0.3
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-171,000	-18.0
Total	950,160	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	340,000	35.8
Renewalist movement	340,000	35.8

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

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:** Christians 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. **Evangelical movement:** 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. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

Around half of the Christians in Bangladesh belong to the Roman Catholic Church, who have dioceses spread across the country. Protestants are also found throughout the country, but they are stronger among 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).

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

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. The April 2023 attacks (see above: *Specific examples of violent incidents*) were a reminder that ethnic religious hostilities play an often underestimated role. In the last years, another hotspot developed when Bangladesh became host to more than 900,000 Islamic refugees from neighboring Myanmar. Most of them are located in Cox's Bazar district, at the south-eastern tip of Bangladesh, relocation efforts within Bangladesh are slow, but continue. The country struggles to take care of them, even with the help of the international community. As repatriation efforts have been constantly stalled, 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. The camps have also become a place where a tiny minority of Rohingya converts lives. They face increasing pressure but have no means of escape.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians: This group includes embassy personnel and foreign workers in the important textile sector. They face being under observation and threatened by Islamic militants. This community also includes the Rohingya from Myanmar.

Historical Christian communities: This group includes the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Bangladesh (Anglican) and Seventh Day Adventists, among others. 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. As one country researcher put it: "They are outcasts from society."

Non-traditional Christian communities: This group includes Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations. The Assemblies of God, for instance, mainly gather for worship in house churches. They are frequently threatened and at times violently attacked. When such churches are active in outreach, they are regarded as 'troublemakers' and face fierce opposition.

WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Bangladesh

Reporting period

01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

Position on the World Watch List

Bangladesh: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	71	26
WWL 2023	69	30
WWL 2022	68	29
WWL 2021	67	31
WWL 2020	63	38

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

Although pressure dropped in all Spheres of life, the violence score rose sharply from 10.7 points in WWL 2023 to 14.1 points, reflecting the killing of eight tribal Christians in April 2023. This caused the increase in overall score. Apart from the various convert groups, the Christian minority in general continues to face discrimination, neglect and violence.

Persecution engines

Bangladesh: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Medium
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Medium
Clan oppression	CO	Weak
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Very weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Weak

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong), blended with Islamic oppression (Strong)

Politics in Bangladesh is family business and for a long time, it has been a competition between two women. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League showed that she will do everything necessary to stay in power, including getting her rival, Khaleda Zia from the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), sentenced on corruption charges, leading one country expert to call her an "elected dictator". The possibly best example of this in the reporting period was the silencing of long-standing human rights organization Odhikar and the closing of an opposition-affiliated newspaper (see above: Political and legal landscape). For the time being, parliamentary opposition in Bangladesh is virtually non-existent, although the outcome of the January 2024 elections will need to be watched closely (see above: Trends 2). Although Christians and other religious minorities enjoy more freedom than in many other Muslim countries, they can easily be used as scapegoats, especially in the tense situation the country finds itself in.

Islamic oppression affects all categories of Christian communities in Bangladesh, although the country is officially both a secular and an Islamic country according to the Constitution. It is increasingly difficult to see how this dual system can work in practice, especially as the government is giving in more and more to the demands made by local Islamic groups which are not tied to the opposition, in order to secure their support. It should be noted, however, that [both parties](#), the ruling AL as well as the opposition BNP, have ties to (conservative) Islamic parties (The Diplomat, 16 November 2023). At the same time, the growing number of arrests of Islamic radicals, be it from Hefazat-e-Islami or other groups, shows that apart from the efforts of appeasing and co-opting certain Islamic groups, the government sees the danger such groups bring. Overall, their numbers seem to be growing. These Islamic groups are keeping minorities under close observation, especially converts. They are instilling fear and many of them are inspired by international groups such as the Islamic State group (IS), although the authorities continue to deny any such links. Despite government rhetoric, these links are widely perceived to be real. Families and communities are drivers of persecution and monitor the activities of converts (especially in rural areas) and this restricts everyday life for converts more intensely than radical groups do at the moment.

The Myanmar-Bangladesh border region has become volatile following the sudden influx of Muslim Rohingya refugees in 2017 - estimated to be more than 700,000 - crossing the border from Myanmar. As referred to above, official estimations are that more than 900,000 Rohingya refugees are living in Bangladesh. They are living in desperate circumstances with little hope of returning in the near future and are putting a great strain on Bangladesh. The insurgency group Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), which has been attacking border posts in Myanmar, is also active in the Bangladeshi refugee camps. Thus, this refugee problem could lead to growing Islamic radicalism in Bangladesh. It is this potential 'spillover effect' which adds to the government's nervousness. Given the situation in Myanmar, repatriating them is out of the question and Bangladesh has started to relocate 'volunteers' to an island in an effort to relieve the situation in the camps onshore (see above: *Social and cultural landscape*).

Religious nationalism - Buddhist and Hindu (Medium), blended with Ethno-religious hostility (Medium) and Clan oppression (Weak)

There are almost twice as many Buddhists and more than 10 times as many Hindus in Bangladesh as Christians, although the 2022 census noted a declining number of Hindus. Buddhists are mostly found among the indigenous ethnic people groups of Bangladesh in the areas bordering India and Myanmar - for instance, the Chittagong Hill Tracts (in the south-east), Sylhet Division (in the north-east), Rajshahi Division (in the north-west) and Mymensingh District (north-central). The ethnic minorities of Bangladesh have their own cultural traditions and languages, for instance the Chakma, Tripura, Garo and Marma tribal groups. As a result, *Religious nationalism* is mixed with *Ethno-religious hostility* and *Clan oppression*. 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, as have family, friends and local communities - not to mention the radical Buddhists aiming to strengthen local Buddhist and indigenous groups in resisting Christianity. These are all drivers of persecution. This means that new Christian believers of a tribal background are being forced to follow the age-old norms and values of their community, whether these are religious in nature or not. In majority Hindu communities, leaders and families put pressure on Christian converts to return to Hinduism. And while persecution of ethnic minority Christians is normally not violent, the killing of eight Bawm tribal Christians in April 2023 is a reminder that conflicts always have the potential to escalate.

Drivers of persecution

Bangladesh: Drivers of Persecution									
	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	WEAK				VERY STRONG	WEAK
Government officials	Strong	Medium	Medium	Weak				Strong	Weak
Ethnic group leaders		Medium	Medium	Weak				Weak	Weak
Non-Christian religious leaders	Very strong	Very strong	Strong	Medium				Very strong	Weak
Violent religious groups	Strong	Strong	Medium	Weak				Weak	Weak
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Very strong	Very strong	Strong	Medium				Strong	Weak
One's own (extended) family	Very strong	Very strong	Strong	Strong				Strong	Weak
Political parties	Medium	Medium	Medium	Weak				Medium	Weak
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups		Medium	Medium	Weak					
Organized crime cartels or networks	Weak	Weak	Medium	Weak				Weak	Weak

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

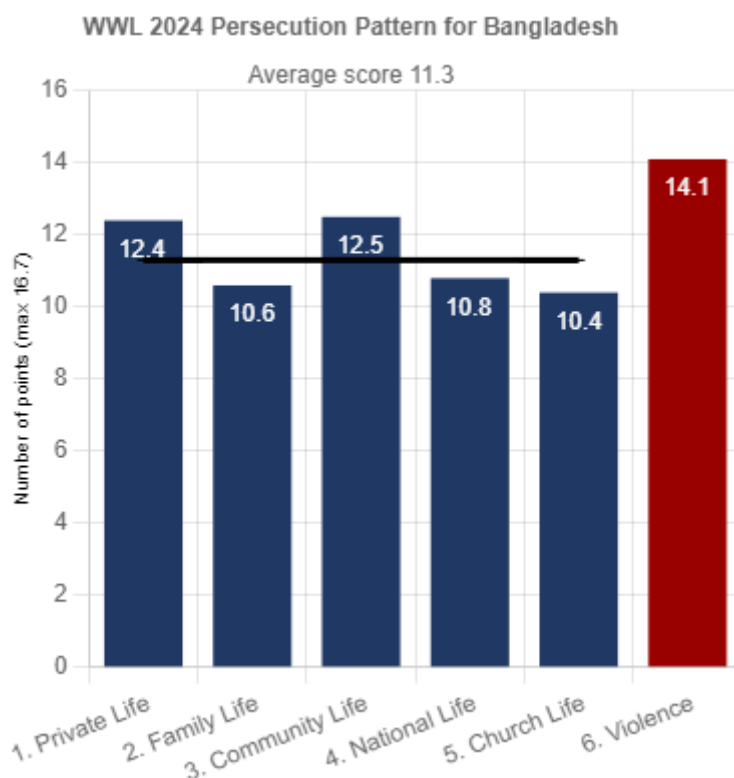
Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia, blended with Islamic oppression

- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Very strong):** Muslim leaders in Bangladesh are often drivers of persecution targeting Christians, especially when Christian communities are seen as evangelistic or openly welcoming converts, as this is often perceived as threatening the Muslim majority. They preach and warn against Christians, causing negative attitudes to and at times, mobilizing a mob with this.
- **Extended family (Very strong):** For families, it is often hard to accept that their relatives - frequently children - have left Islam to follow the Christian faith. In their eyes, this publicly dishonors the family within society and therefore, in many cases, families cut all ties with converts. In some cases, converts suffer physical attacks from their families, are put under house arrest or expelled.
- **Violent religious groups (Medium):** Local radical Islamic groups, specifically *Jamaatul Mujahedin Bangladesh* (JMB), *Jamaat-e-Islami*, *Hefazat-e-Islami* and *Ahle Sunnat* are targeting the Christian minority, singling out converts. A notable trend is the rise of IS attacks in the country, targeting primarily free thinkers and minority religious groups, with the Hindu minority being a particular focus. *Hefazat-e-Islami* was dealt a swift blow by the government, with hundreds of members [arrested](#) in May 2021 (The Diplomat, 19 May 2021). However, the government is still courting other violent Islamic groups.
- **Government officials (Strong):** Government officials are drivers of *Islamic oppression* often combined with *Dictatorial paranoia*, since they aim to stay in power. Whereas discrimination against Christians can be found at all levels of government, concrete action is usually taken by officials at the local level. Especially in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, government officials act harshly against Christians and treat them unfairly, for example when land issues are concerned. The army treats ethnic minorities in this region with very high suspicion as well. As already stated, it has become clear over the last years that the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has tightened its grip on power. Whoever is seen as a threat, will be targeted. Even though Christians are widely regarded as being government supporters, as a minority they easily become a target or are used as scapegoats.
- **Normal citizens (Very strong):** A rising number of incidents involving mob violence against Christians has been reported. Ordinary citizens perceive conversion to Christianity as something which is socially undesirable, and which places an individual outside society. Therefore, citizens ostracize converts, something which happens in particular in rural areas. Members of ethnic minorities, many of them Christian, are watched with suspicion as well.
- **Political parties (Medium):** In an effort to consolidate and if possible increase power, political parties have wooed radical Islamic groups by putting pressure on Christians as well as by stressing the special status of Islam. Local political leaders are often involved in land issues, which affect the Christian minority. Some political parties are cooperating with radical Islamic groups, e.g. with *Jamaat-e-Islami*. Political parties are often not primary drivers of persecution but are used by Islamic groups - especially at the local level - as a vehicle for gaining wider influence. Radical Islamic political parties do not play a role in Bangladesh.

Drivers of Religious nationalism (Buddhist and Hinduist), blended with Ethno-religious hostility and Clan oppression

- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Very strong):** Buddhist and Hindu religious leaders are driving persecution against converts. These religions are in a minority position in Bangladesh and perceive themselves as having to face up to a growing radical interpretation of Islam. For this reason, people converting to Christianity is felt to be a further weakening of their ranks. Thus they call for converts to be placed under considerable pressure to give up their new Christian faith. Buddhist monks and Hindu priests are therefore at the forefront as persecution drivers.
- **Extended family (Very strong):** What has been stated above for religious leaders is even more strongly the case for a convert's own family. Here, conversion is often identified with shaming the reputation and dignity of the family in the local rural society. Therefore, the Buddhist or Hindu family will put a lot of pressure on converts to bring them back and may even expel them from the village, if this does not succeed.
- **Normal citizens (Very strong):** In the closely-knit minority societies in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, it is not just the family putting pressure on converts. The very act of conversion is seen as putting oneself outside society and the village and as weakening the whole religious group. Encouraged by religious leaders, neighbors and friends put pressure on converts to recant.
- **Violent religious groups (Strong):** In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, violent religious groups like *Jana Sanghati Samity* (JSS) exist. They frequently threaten pastors and church leaders who are active in the area. Occasionally, clashes happen and these can turn very violent.
- **Revolutionaries/para-military groups (Medium):** Groups like ARSA are fighting for the rights of the Rohingya minority, they are very active in the refugee camps and will target Christians when they are perceived as getting in their way.
- **Ethnic group leaders (Medium):** Often, ethnic group leaders put pressure on those putting themselves outside society to come back and rejoin the minority's fight for survival. For this, however, they need to share identity, of which religion is an important part.
- **Political parties (Medium):** Ethnic group leaders are often political leaders as well, so they will use (local) politics as well to put pressure on the Christians. They can play a role in land issues as well.
- **Government officials (Medium):** Apart from what was already said under *Islamic oppression*, local government officials make Christian's lives difficult by getting actively involved in land issues or by staying passive when it comes to investigating attacks against Christians, thereby discouraging the minority.
- **Organized crime (Weak):** Churches and homes of Christians, especially from the ethnic minorities, have been attacked and destroyed by elements connected to the land-grabbing mafia. These are usually local strongmen, often with good connections to local and sometimes even national politicians.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for Bangladesh shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Bangladesh decreased to a score of 11.3 points in WWL 2024 from 11.6 points in WWL 2023. Thus pressure is at a very high level, especially on converts to Christianity. This is particularly the case for converts among the Rohingya refugees who fled Myanmar in 2017.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Community* and *Private spheres*, where converts are particularly affected, but all categories of Christian communities face pressure in the *National* and *Church spheres*.
- The Violence score increased significantly to 14.1 points in WWL 2024 from 10.7 points in WWL 2023. This was mainly due to the higher number of killings, especially the April 2023 incident in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2024 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://openodoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.75 points)

Bangladesh is one of the few secular Muslim-majority nations and therefore conversion is permitted by law. Article 41(1)(a) protects the citizen's fundamental right freely to profess, practice, and propagate religion of Bangladesh Constitution. The freedom guaranteed in this Article is the right of man to entertain such religious views as appeal to his individual conscience without interference by any person or power, civil or ecclesiastical, is as fundamental in a free state as is the right to life and liberty. So, from a legal standpoint, the conversion process seems to be very simple: The law provides that the convert goes to a lawyer presenting a written signed document, which states he or she changed religion for personal reasons, under no pressure and of their own free will. In practice, for any Christian, Buddhist or Hindu who wishes to become a Muslim, this procedure is almost a mere 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. A country expert emphasized how this does not just affect Muslims: "Not only for Muslims, converts from Hinduism, Ethnic religions, Buddhism (and even those simply 'converting' from one denomination to another) also face difficulties."

Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (3.50 points)

Converts have to be very cautious and often prefer to keep their conversion a secret from their family. Those who choose to speak of their conversion are regularly harassed, bullied, often threatened and forced to remove their blogs and Facebook page. Under the "Digital Security Act", adopted in October 2018, defamation, hurting religious sentiments, causing deterioration of law and order, and instigating against any person or organization through publishing or transmitting any material in websites or in electronic form can lead to a maximum 14-year prison sentence. Even joining a gathering of Christians without revealing one's own faith can lead to unwanted exposure and increased risk for converts.

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.50 points)

Given the pressure on converts as well as on those who actively invite others to follow the Christian faith, most converts prefer to stay as invisible as possible in order not to make themselves targets. With the growth of radical Islamic influence, more Christians now prefer to keep a low profile and avoid contact with anyone outside their own group, because in a growing part of the majority religion, conversion is seen as a grave sin deserving punishment and, in some circles, even death. In 2022, a country expert stated: "'Sharing the Gospel is constitutionally protected in Bangladesh, but it still often brings persecution, especially from Muslim groups. Over the last three years, thousands of Christians have been displaced from their homes. Extremist groups will even burn down the houses. Police have watched many of these attacks

taking place but did nothing to stop them. This is a common phenomenon. When people from a Muslim majority background adopt Christian faith, they are not welcomed. And they are just thrown out of their family homes."

Block 1.9: It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians. (3.25 points)

Especially for new converts, it has been very risky to meet with other Christians, even more so when they come from a different village or the city. Most of the converts prefer to stay secret believers out of fear from society and family. If any Christians meet with them, community people start to ask questions and monitor their activities. There have been cases where roads have been blocked when it was known that Christians were planning to meet and in the WWL 2024 reporting period several converts were beaten for meeting with other Christians or were expelled from their homes. This is not only true for converts from a Muslim background, but also applies to those from a Buddhist or Hindu background.

People seen as converting or proselytizing can be detained and accused of criminal offences. Christians who are not converts have more freedom in their private lives, however. Converts and Rohingya Christians cannot have any Christian images or symbols visible because it is too risky for their safety. There were reports of violent attacks when Christians displayed Christian images. Particularly in rural areas, Christians are cautious and tend to avoid visibility because of fear of attacks. In one instance, journalists appeared at a Christian training session and took photos of the participants.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.75 points)

Bangladesh's education system gives every student the opportunity to study their own religion, be it Islam, Buddhism or Christianity. The subject 'Religion' is one of the compulsory subjects in the Primary and High School Public Examinations. But many Christian students face problems at school for studying their own religion. There is a bias towards Islamic religious education in state schools which is not just apparent in law but also in practice, since there are many more options for Islamic religious education compared to non-Islamic religious education. Schools simply pay no attention to minorities and in many cases, schoolteachers do not teach Christianity, so that parents have to educate them at home. In many cases, Christian children are forced to study non-Christian teachings and use Islamic textbooks at school. There is often also a lack of Christian religious books and so they are forced to study the foundational scripture of the majority religion - at times that is Islam, at times Hinduism and sometimes even Buddhism in the tribal areas. Even traditional Christians face the same struggles."

As one country expert noted: "The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) formulated 'Christianity and Moral Education' from Class 3 to Class 10, but teaching for Christian students at all was not guaranteed. A survey showed that Protestant children failed to get GPA-5 in public examinations like JSC, SSC examination only for Christianity and moral education. The lack of Christian teachers or helpers in these stages of educational life is depriving them of proper education. Every student has the right to study and be examined in his/her own religion, in this

regard, the local education officer and the administration play a leading role."

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.50 points)

Children of converts are often scolded by teachers and even by the headmasters, who put pressure on children and parents alike to return to Islam. Many children therefore try to avoid school as it is hard to stand the pressure. Sometimes, children are threatened, but often they are promised material and other benefits for them and their family if they return to Islam. Seeing their teachers as a role model, fellow pupils frequently mock Christian schoolchildren, which can reach the point where the latter refuse to go to school or leave the house at all. For many classes, there is an opportunity of receiving scholarships for good students and help with financing fees for poor students and for girl students. However, in many cases Christian children have been excluded from these opportunities. There are two main reasons for this: One is that the authorities think Christians are receiving money from foreign contacts and secondly, it seems they deliberately want to make life difficult for Christian children and especially Christian converts. In one case in the WWL 2024 reporting period, the driver of the local school bus simply refused to give children of converts a ride, thus forcing them to walk long distances.

Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (3.00 points)

For churches belonging to the historical Christian communities, it is usually no problem to conduct baptisms as long as they are carried out within the church compounds and do not attract too much attention. Villagers are known to disturb and hinder baptisms from other churches, and some church leaders refuse to baptize converts from a Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim background in local churches for fear of reprisals, since baptisms are seen as the ultimate sign of breaking with their old belief and relationships. Converts are usually sent to other cities or areas to be baptized. In the WWL 2024 reporting period, there was a violent attack at a Baptism service, which could only be continued after police arrived and protected the church.

Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (2.75 points)

This is especially a problem which is faced by parents who are converts. If the 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. Frequently, pressure and interference from the wider family is even stronger, so that uncles, aunts or grandparents try to influence and derail the parents' efforts. This can climax in a situation where the child is separated from its parents, or the parents are even forced to leave the family home without the child. There have been reports about this for convert children from a Hindu background too.

Once converts are discovered, they often face the threat of divorce (if married) and can lose their inheritance rights, especially in rural areas. Organizing a Christian wedding or funeral can be difficult or even impossible for converts and there have been reports in the WWL 2024 reporting period of deceased converts having to be buried in cities far away from their hometowns. Such instances are often used by family members to put pressure on the convert

to return to their previous faith. Converts are often isolated from their families and may even be forced to leave their homes.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.1: Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (e.g. for not meeting majority religion or traditional dress codes, beard codes etc.). (3.75 points)

Christians have often faced the problems listed in this question. The pressure to conform to the majority is increasing, not just in questions of dress code. Although the courts have ruled that people cannot be forced to wear skull caps, veils or other religious clothing in workplaces, schools and colleges, many still follow traditional dress codes and put pressure on Christians to do the same. Similar reports are obtained from Hindu-majority communities.

Block 3.9: Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education). (3.50 points)

Due to government policy, Christian schools have to choose students with the best grades for enrolment, even though their policy advocates for a quota for disadvantaged students from a minority background. Christians from a variety of backgrounds are facing disadvantages in their education. Few Christians get the chance to attend BA or MA degree courses at a college or university. There are cases where authorities do not accept a Christian's stated religion and force graduating students to take the exam in a religion they do not adhere to. One student shared: "I'm a Secondary School Certificate (SSC) candidate. I had to take a test on the Islam Religion subject. When we tried to fix the issue, the exam board and the teachers at the school said that my parents' names are Muslim as well as mine, so how can it be possible that I am a Christian. They didn't trust me, even though we provided proof." Another student shared, "I had to leave my home because my family did not accept my Christian faith. Currently, I am a SSC candidate and had to take exam on the Islam religion subject forcefully. Even though our guardian at school tried to prove my religion to the authorities, they didn't listen and didn't fix the problem."

Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.00 points)

Article 28 (1) of the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh declares: "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth" and Article 29 ensures the equality of opportunity in public employment, but minorities and especially Christians have faced many problems in this respect. Due to their low social status, it is already more difficult for Christians to find work than Muslims. Often, when they finally manage to be invited to a job interview, they discover that the questions are less about their skills and more about their faith. This is particularly experienced by converts. If Christians do gain employment, it is normal that they will not be promoted or given benefits coming with the job. Others are discriminated against at the workplace. In one case in the WWL 2024 reporting period, an applicant was applying for a government job and was asked about his religious belief, even though it should not play a role and be part of an interview. When he said he was a Christian, the interview was soon brought to a conclusion and the applicant was told that he had not been

chosen.

Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.00 points)

In cases of (suspected) conversion, Christians have been interrogated by the police and/or vigilante groups and threatened. Converts often face a whole group of people interrogating them about their faith and trying to bring them back to their former religion. There is the widely perceived misunderstanding that people simply convert to the Christian faith for money. Local police are mainly interested in keeping the peace and will therefore give in to the demands of the Muslim majority. For instance, the police will often say: “Why did you convert from Islam to Christianity? Why are you converting other people to Christianity? We will not accept your complaint.”

In general, people are very curious to know about Christians and to learn about their lifestyle and activities, as they are a minority. That is one reason why Christian activities are monitored, especially by the local community. When traditional churches organize programs inside or outside the church, neighbors will always be watching. This has a downside, however. Christians, especially converts, have also been monitored by local leaders, vigilante groups and violent groups. Christians are also being discriminated against in their business lives. Some Christians have had to give up their shops or other businesses due to pressure and boycotts by the Muslim majority. Sometimes, agricultural land has simply been taken away from them or plantations have been destroyed. Other Christians, especially converts, have to pay disproportionate sums of money, e.g., for using a road to their house.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.14: Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished. (3.75 points)

In almost all cases where Christians are the victims of an incident, no perpetrators are found or punished. This is even true when it is about violent attacks such as rape and the perpetrators are known. There is a high degree of unwillingness on the part of the authorities to even start proper investigations.

Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (3.50 points)

Non-Muslim religious bodies are not required to register with the government; however, all non-governmental organizations (NGOs) including religious ones are required to register with the government's NGO Affairs Bureau if they receive foreign financial assistance for social development projects. In November 2017, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina instructed the authorities to monitor NGO activities in Bangladesh. The NGO Affairs Bureau regularly monitors foreign-funded NGO activities. The Foreign Donations (Voluntarily Donations) Regulation Bill has effectively closed many Christian NGOs, especially smaller ones. It has also made operations for the remaining NGOs more complicated. NGOs that predominantly work on civil and political rights issues face constant obstacles from the authorities, including being barred from accessing

funds, harassment and surveillance. The effective ban on the human rights organization Odhikar and the sentencing of its leaders, although not a Christian organization, illustrate the problems well (see above: *Political and Legal landscape*).

Block 4.2: Officials have refused to recognize an individual's conversion as recorded in government administration systems, identify cards (etc.). (3.25 points)

In Bangladesh, Christians not only have to deal with the authorities refusing to recognize conversions, but also with officials willfully inserting wrong information into the government database. This is especially true for converts, but also for other categories of Christian communities. The government has a digital site for storing personal population data collected during the National Identity Card census, but for many Christians the religious information appearing there is not correct and most are unaware of that. As a result, Christians who are not members of one of the traditional denominations are often excluded from the statistics. One of the reasons for this is that the names and surnames of converts indicate their Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim origins, since they do not change their names after conversion. So, instead of asking or checking the papers, officers put information as per their understanding, often even when there is official proof of the conversion. The government provides the Smart NID card free of charge to all adult citizens of Bangladesh. But because of these mistakes, changing the information is very difficult for Christians and only possible after a long and expensive process.

Block 4.12: Christians, churches or Christian organizations have been hindered in publicly displaying religious symbols. (3.25 points)

In Bangladesh, religious pictures and symbols - also statues - are thought to encourage the worship of idols and/or can be seen as signs of proselytizing. Many mission schools have removed the cross and other Christian symbols to avoid offending the 'sensitivities' of local Muslims; churches in certain areas avoid showing these symbols prominently as well. Converts in their congregations do not use visible Christian symbols. Historical churches are freer in this respect, as are Christians living in urban areas. Still, every WWL reporting period there are reports of attacks against churches because of visible religious symbols.

Christians are frequently slandered, especially in rural areas. Sermons preached by radical Islamic clerics often contain inflammatory hate speech and discriminatory language towards religious minorities, which create an environment of fear and intolerance. Numerous Christian leaders have also been threatened. Media reporting about Christians is often biased, predominantly from Islamic TV channels. The government is responsible for the fair distribution of humanitarian aid during flood and storm disasters. Local authorities have provided a lot of assistance, but there are many reports that Christians, especially those coming from a Muslim or Buddhist background, have not been deemed eligible to receive support. Thus, when they approach the village leaders, many are told: "Well, you're Christian. You became a Christian, so you have no part in this support."

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (4.00 points)

Monitoring is not usually carried out directly by the state (although it would have the means by applying the ICTA and DSA - Information and Communications Technology Act and Digital Security Act), but by local radical Islamic groups, religious leaders or members of society in general, who may also take the law into their own hands by interrogating and punishing Christians. Since Christians are constantly suspected of carrying out missionary work, the monitoring is widespread, whereas its intensity depends on how active the churches are. Radical Islamic groups (and sometimes neighbors too) often refer to Prime Minister Hasina's speech, where she said that whoever hurts religious sentiments will be punishable by law; thus, Christian preachers and teachers, in addition to converts, are monitored and threatened.

Block 5.7: Churches have been hindered from openly integrating converts. (3.75 points)

As stated above, many pastors and church leaders refuse to baptize converted Muslims for fear of reprisals. Converts are advised to travel to a different part of the country to get baptized. But even then, as converts they cannot be openly integrated into church activities. Once their status becomes known, they and the church involved would face trouble (for conversion and proselytization, respectively); threats and attacks are then likely to take place and roads leading to the church blocked.

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (3.50 points)

Christians have reported that they are being monitored especially in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and in areas where they are suspected of carrying out evangelism among Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. In these areas, the vigilante groups and authorities apparently receive the names and details of all participants and key leaders of churches through informers. Online church meetings come with additional risks as the government has increased its monitoring of all online activities as a means of fighting against religious extremism.

Block 5.11: Pastors or other Christian leaders (or their family members) have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

For the past few years, home-grown Islamic militant groups have been appearing all over the country. The Christian minority is often targeted by such groups since their missionary zeal is perceived as being dangerous. Targets for harassment and intimidation are pastors and church leaders, especially among the convert community, as they are most visible within the church communities and carry the blame for 'misguiding' people and converting them. A country expert summed it up aptly: "Pastors and other Christian leaders, and their family members, have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons, as people think that they are the ones who convert and influence people to come to Christianity. That's why people target them and their families to create fear."

In general, churches are able to function in Bangladesh, but restrictions are increasing, and it is reported that training has become more difficult, as it is often disrupted. Villagers are suspicious of Christians, and where there has been training for Christian leaders, they will ask for details about who is attending and what the training involves. Openly offering and distributing Bibles has been hindered and faces strong opposition. While work among youth has not been forbidden, the conversion of minors is punishable and generally seen as unethical. Already as far back as in April 2014, a research paper published by the University of Chittagong called Christian NGOs "neo-missionary". This mindset has become more entrenched over time. Bangladeshi authorities have withheld the visa extensions of four foreign missionaries including a nun. According to church sources, this was due to negative intelligence reports. The Ministry of Religion clarified that it will approve visa applications only if there is a positive report from the various intelligence agencies of the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following 5 points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced. Possible reasons for this may be:

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:

- *Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).*
- *In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.*
- *Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.*

3. The use of symbolic numbers: In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

Bangladesh: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	10	3
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	6	10
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	10 *	7
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	2	2
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	10 *	2
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	10 *	4
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	4	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	1000 *	20
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	100 *	30
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	10 *	3
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	1000 *	230
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	1000 *	0

For the WWL 2024 reporting period:

- **Christians killed:** In April 2024, for example, eight ethnic Bawm Christians were killed in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. For details, see above: *Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period.*

- **Christians attacked:** Christians, especially converts from all backgrounds, face attacks from members of their surrounding community, often organized by radical religious groups and acting as mobs. Converts' families can be another driver of violence in an effort to make them return to their original faith.
- **Christians arrested:** There were reports of at least 10 Christians who were detained or arrested and imprisoned. However, details cannot be published for security reasons.
- **Churches attacked:** At least 6 churches (or places where Christians gather) were attacked, mainly by members of local communities.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** Christian homes have been attacked in a variety of places, many by community members, some by land-grabbers. Reports came in from all over Bangladesh and from converts of all backgrounds. No details can be given for security reasons.
- **Christians abducted:** There have been reports of at least 7 Christians being abducted. For security reasons, no details can be given.

5 Year trends

The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

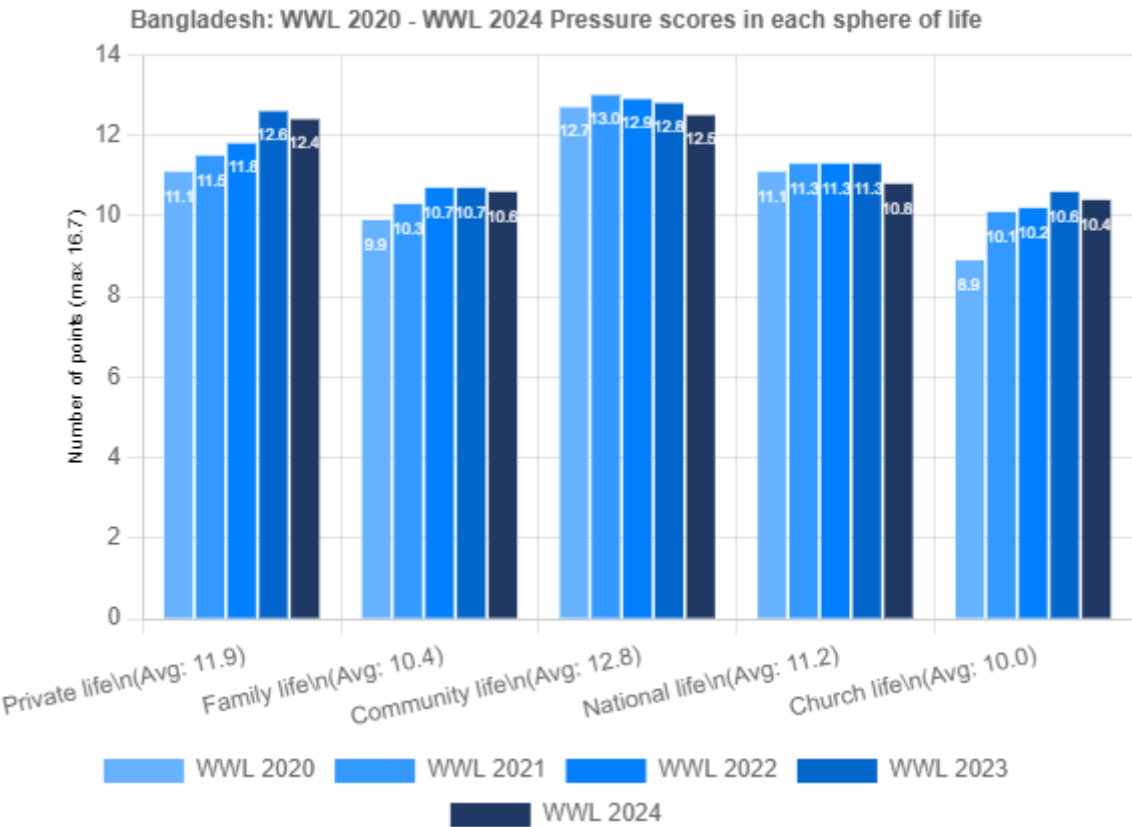
5 Year trends: Average pressure

Bangladesh: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	11.3
2023	11.6
2022	11.3
2021	11.2
2020	10.7

From WWL 2020 to WWL 2023, the average pressure rose each WWL reporting period, but has now returned to the WWL 2022 level of 11.3 points in the WWL 2024 reporting period.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

As can be seen in the chart below, from WWL 2020 onwards the pressure on Christians gradually increased over all spheres of life but appears to have more or less levelled off in the Family, Community and National spheres of life. The rises were partly due to the influx of Rohingya refugees, and the increased pressure on Christian converts among them. However, the rises were also due to increased reporting from the tribal areas concerning the situation of the growing number of converts in those areas.



5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



As can be seen in the chart above, the level of violence increased steadily until WWL 2022. In WWL 2023, there was a slight decrease, but due to the killing of eight tribal Christians in April 2023, the violence score increased sharply by 3.3 points in WWL 2024.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Forced marriage
Security	Abduction; Incarceration by family (house arrest); Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Enforced religious dress code
Technological	-

Bangladesh is a class-based and patriarchal society. Despite the country being led by female politicians for many years, Bangladesh is still a country where it is dangerous and difficult to be a woman. It has one of the highest child marriage rates in the world, with 51% of girls being married before they turn 18 (Girls Not Brides, 2023). Although the overall child marriage rate in Bangladesh has declined and altered in structure in recent decades, the rate of child marriage continues to be one of the highest in the world. In addition, women in Bangladesh continue to have little protection or access to justice in cases of domestic violence, child marriage and femicide (HRW 2023 country chapter Bangladesh).

In this context, women and girls – particularly converts – are most vulnerable to rights violations from their nuclear family, extended family, friends, neighbors and local community. Persecution of Christian women is complex, often hidden behind marriages and family life, and justified by social norms. Conversion to Christianity is viewed as a betrayal and as such, Christian women and girls can face harassment from their community, especially if they do not conform to expected modes of dress.

Because women and girls are mostly dependent on males, sexual assault, rape, forced divorce and forced marriage are common forms of religious persecution. In addition, they experience specific forms of physical violence aimed at degrading and shaming them. “Both men and women experience violence,” a country expert clarifies “but the distinguishing feature is that men most commonly are subjected to visible acts, often in public, of religious persecution, whereas women more commonly experience invisible persecution which often involve shame and sexuality”. Women are not only abused physically, but also mentally, and converts especially can be targeted through house arrest, described by an expert as “a captive life” where they are isolated from other family members, their churches and communities.

“Sexual abuse may be the most common way to persecute Christian women and girls. It assumes that a woman's sexual purity is equivalent to her worth,” a country expert shares, continuing: “Women are considered by the persecutors as ideal targets to destabilize the Christian community and stifle the next generation of Christians without reprisals. The threat of shame

prevents much of the injustice done to Christian women from being disclosed or brought to the attention of the police. Even when presented to the appropriate authorities, the police often delay taking action.”

Victims of rape struggle to move on from the trauma, particularly if they become pregnant by their abuser. Furthermore, [refugee camps](#) continue to be places of heightened vulnerability for women and girls, and are particularly precarious for Rohingya Christians who have fled violence in Myanmar (UN Women, 2 January 2022). A country expert describes how in the camps “Christian women and girls are often abducted, beaten and ‘forced to convert to Islam’ and marry Muslim men”.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Denied inheritance or possessions
Political and Legal	False charges; Imprisonment by government
Security	Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	-
Technological	-

One result of the male-oriented culture in Bangladesh is that men generally become Christians first, followed by their families later. Likewise, as leaders within their families, men and boys often face persecution first. A country expert explains: “Men most commonly are subjected to visible acts, often in public, of religious persecution”, often by authorities, but even by the community. They are commonly beaten for “betraying their culture and religion”, tortured and threatened. Pressure from community members and local Muslim leaders has also caused men and their families to flee from their homes.

Christian men have been targeted by the authorities; sometimes they are also accused of bribing people into becoming Christians and become entangled in drug dealing by so-called “friends” for the purposes of attracting the attention of the police. Church leaders in particular can be at risk of arrest, although imprisonment is still rare. As men are the main providers, if they lose their job because of their faith – or are imprisoned – it will affect their whole family.

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department IRFR 2022 Bangladesh (p.1/2):

- “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 [2022].”

- “In March [2022], 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.”

According to one [report](#), in the period 2013 - October 2021, 3710 cases of violence against the Hindu minority were recorded (UCA News, 20 October 2021). 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 converted by force.

All religious minorities are prone to discrimination and violence, this includes 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](#) (UCA News, 18 April 2019). 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 (Daily Mail, 11 July 2020).

One country expert explained about the situation for Hindus in more detail:

- "Many Hindus have been unable to recover landholdings lost due to the now-defunct Vested Property Act. Although an Awami League government repealed the Act in 2001, the new government did not take any concrete measures to reverse the property seizures that occurred under the Act. The Vested Property Act was an East Pakistan-era law that allowed the government to expropriate 'enemy' (in practice Hindu) lands. Under the law, the government seized approximately 2.6 million acres of land, affecting almost all Hindus in the country. According to a study conducted by a Dhaka University professor, nearly 200,000 Hindu families lost approximately 40,667 acres of land since 2001, despite the annulment of the Act the same year."

For the Hindu minority, the attacks on a Hindu festival on 15 October 2021 in [Comilla](#), leaving four dead, left them in permanent fear of possible future attacks (Human Rights Watch, 21 October 2021).

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Islamic oppression

A lot depends on the outcome of the national elections in January 2024, which were two months away at the time of writing this report. However, as long as Bangladesh is struggling with radical Islamic groups from inside the country and from abroad, the Christian minority will be facing challenging times and converts in particular are likely to be vulnerable to attack. The fact that the government is both fighting Islamic militancy, when it turns violent, and wooing Islamist

groups for election support, does not give the Christian community much confidence for the future. Additionally, the country faces serious challenges coming from the madrassa system, regardless of whether the official number of 22,000 madrassas is correct or estimations of 70,000 apply. In officially registered madrassas around 2 million students are trained, whereas in non-registered, privately-run madrassas there are said to be more than 4 million students. As in Pakistan, these madrassas are potential hotbeds for training students in hatred and violence, as became evident by the fact that nine of the perpetrators of the Dhaka attack in July 2016 were madrassa students. Christians are also targeted by radical Muslims because they are seen as being allied with the government (due to their preference for retaining secularism as set out in the Constitution).

Religious nationalism - Buddhist and Hindu

Given that Bangladesh has sizable Hindu and Buddhist minorities, and that in times of increasing pressure from the majority society, religion becomes a particularly important factor of identity, converts from a Hindu and Buddhist background will continue to face strong opposition from their family, neighbors and religious leaders.

Dictatorial paranoia

In former Chief Justice Surendra Kumar Sinha's 2018 publication entitled „A broken dream: Human rights, rule of law and democracy“, it is claimed that state security agents [intimidated and influenced judges](#) to rule in favor of the government, illustrating how fraught politics are in Bangladesh (UCA News, 27 September 2018). He claimed [political asylum](#) in Canada in July 2019 (Benar News, 26 July 2019). An arrest warrant was issued against him, and he has been [sentenced in absentia](#) for alleged corruption to a prison sentence of 11 years (Al-Jazeera, 10 November 2021). If the Awami League is re-elected in January 2024, this Persecution engine is likely to remain in operation: Whoever is perceived as a threat by the rulers, will be targeted and brought down, no matter how high his position.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: both parties - <https://thedi diplomat.com/2023/11/religion-and-bangladeshs-political-parties/>
- Drivers of persecution description: arrested - <https://thedi diplomat.com/2021/05/bangladesh-cracks-down-on-hardline-islamist-group/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: refugee camps - <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2022/01/rohingya-refugees-in-bangladesh-join-un-campaign-against-gender-based-violence>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: report - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/religious-fanatics-gain-strength-in-muslim-majority-bangladesh/94609>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: declare the Ahmadi minority non-Muslim - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/cleric-demands-bangladesh-ahmadis-be-declared-non-muslim/85004>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: dug up - <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8513445/Muslim-fanatics-dig-three-day-old-girls-body-cemetery.html>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Comilla - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/21/bangladesh-deadly-attacks-hindu-festival>
- Future outlook: intimidated and influenced judges - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/former-chief-justices-book-causes-furore-in-bangladesh/83456>

- Future outlook: political asylum - <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/Bangladesh-politics-07262019175417.html>
- Future outlook: sentenced in absentia - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/10/bangladesh-sentences-former-chief-justice-jail-corruption>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Bangladesh>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.