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## Bangladesh: Country Dossier

December 2020



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2021

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	94	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.2	94	93	94	93	89
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.3	9.8	92	92	91	91	91
4	Libya	15.6	15.4	15.9	16.3	16.3	12.4	92	90	87	86	78
5	Pakistan	13.9	14.2	15.1	14.9	13.5	16.7	88	88	87	86	88
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	11.1	88	87	86	86	82
7	Yemen	16.6	16.6	16.5	16.7	16.7	3.9	87	85	86	85	85
8	Iran	14.5	14.5	13.9	15.7	16.5	10.6	86	85	85	85	85
9	Nigeria	13.3	13.2	13.9	14.1	14.1	16.7	85	80	80	77	78
10	India	13.0	12.9	13.5	14.9	13.7	15.4	83	83	83	81	73
11	Iraq	13.6	14.6	14.2	14.8	13.8	11.5	82	76	79	86	86
12	Syria	13.3	13.9	13.5	14.5	14.0	12.0	81	82	82	76	86
13	Sudan	13.4	13.4	13.7	13.6	15.7	9.1	79	85	87	87	87
14	Saudi Arabia	15.1	13.9	14.4	15.8	16.6	2.2	78	79	77	79	76
15	Maldives	15.4	15.5	13.9	15.8	16.6	0.4	77	78	78	78	76
16	Egypt	12.5	13.2	11.5	12.7	11.0	14.1	75	76	76	70	65
17	China	12.6	9.7	12.0	13.2	15.4	11.1	74	70	65	57	57
18	Myanmar	11.9	12.0	13.1	12.9	12.3	11.9	74	73	71	65	62
19	Vietnam	12.1	8.8	12.7	14.0	14.5	10.0	72	72	70	69	71
20	Mauritania	14.3	14.0	13.5	14.1	13.6	1.9	71	68	67	57	55
21	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	1.3	71	73	74	73	71
22	Laos	12.1	10.2	13.6	13.5	14.3	6.9	71	72	71	67	64
23	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.5	70	70	69	68	67
24	Algeria	13.9	13.9	11.5	13.1	13.4	3.9	70	73	70	58	58
25	Turkey	12.5	11.5	10.8	13.3	11.6	9.3	69	63	66	62	57
26	Tunisia	12.0	13.1	10.4	11.5	13.2	7.4	67	64	63	62	61
27	Morocco	12.6	13.5	11.2	12.4	14.1	3.7	67	66	63	51	49
28	Mali	9.4	8.2	12.7	10.3	11.5	15.4	67	66	68	59	59
29	Qatar	14.0	13.9	10.8	13.1	14.1	1.5	67	66	62	63	66
30	Colombia	11.4	8.8	12.4	11.0	9.7	13.9	67	62	58	56	53
31	Bangladesh	11.5	10.3	13.0	11.3	10.1	10.6	67	63	58	58	63
32	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.0	9.4	11.8	14.3	67	66	48	-	-
33	Tajikistan	14.0	12.3	11.9	12.5	13.2	2.2	66	65	65	65	58
34	Nepal	12.4	9.7	9.9	13.0	12.3	8.5	66	64	64	64	53
35	CAR	9.0	8.6	13.1	9.6	9.9	15.6	66	68	70	61	58
36	Ethiopia	9.9	8.5	10.7	10.3	10.8	14.4	65	63	65	62	64
37	Mexico	10.3	8.1	12.4	10.7	10.3	12.6	64	60	61	59	57
38	Jordan	13.1	13.9	11.4	11.6	12.4	2.0	64	64	65	66	63
39	Brunei	13.9	14.6	10.7	10.9	13.5	0.7	64	63	63	64	64
40	DRC	8.0	7.9	11.2	9.4	11.6	16.1	64	56	55	33	-
41	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	11.0	12.5	13.4	2.4	64	64	63	63	56
42	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.0	12.3	15.7	64	60	54	38	-
43	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	11.9	12.7	13.8	0.0	64	61	64	62	61
44	Oman	13.2	13.5	10.3	12.5	13.0	0.9	63	62	59	57	53
45	Mozambique	9.3	7.6	11.3	7.9	11.1	16.1	63	43	43	-	-
46	Malaysia	12.1	14.3	12.9	11.5	10.0	2.4	63	62	60	65	60
47	Indonesia	11.5	11.4	12.4	10.7	9.3	7.8	63	60	65	59	55
48	Kuwait	13.2	13.5	9.9	12.2	13.2	1.1	63	62	60	61	57
49	Kenya	11.7	9.2	10.5	8.0	10.3	12.8	62	61	61	62	68
50	Comoros	12.5	11.1	11.4	11.3	14.2	1.9	62	57	56	56	56

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
51	Cuba	10.9	7.7	11.8	12.9	13.4	5.4	62	52	49	49	47
52	Sri Lanka	12.2	9.1	11.7	12.2	9.7	7.0	62	65	58	57	55
53	UAE	13.4	13.3	9.7	12.0	12.4	1.1	62	60	58	58	55
54	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.6	10.6	62	60	52	45	47
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.2	10.4	12.0	1.3	58	57	56	54	48
56	Palestinian Territories	12.5	13.3	9.1	10.4	11.7	0.9	58	60	57	60	64
57	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	10.2	58	55	52	53	59
58	Russian Federation	12.3	8.0	10.2	10.5	12.1	3.9	57	60	60	51	46
59	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.0	56	56	56	56	57
60	Bahrain	12.1	12.5	9.1	10.7	10.5	0.9	56	55	55	57	54
61	Azerbaijan	12.8	9.8	9.4	11.1	12.6	0.0	56	57	57	57	52
62	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	3.7	53	56	48	40	-
63	Nicaragua	6.9	4.6	9.9	11.3	10.0	8.1	51	41	41	-	-
64	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.9	48	48	43	-	-
65	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	12.0	47	48	47	46	53
66	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	5.9	47	45	46	-	-
67	Honduras	6.8	5.0	10.6	7.6	9.0	7.6	46	39	38	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	10.1	11.4	7.2	46	43	42	-	-
69	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.0	43	44	44	-	-
70	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	0.6	43	43	43	-	-
71	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	9.8	0.7	43	41	42	-	-
72	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	8.1	42	42	41	-	-
73	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.3	42	42	43	-	-
74	El Salvador	6.6	4.9	9.8	4.2	8.7	7.8	42	38	30	-	-

## Copyright notice

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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).
- The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.
- The WWL 2021 reporting period was 01 October 2019 - 30 September 2020.
- 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 including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

## Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

In the WWL 2021 reporting period, travel restrictions and other measures introduced by the governments of various countries to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic did cause delays and create the need for restructuring grass-roots research in some cases. Through the agile cooperation of Open Doors field networks, research analysts, external experts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that the WWL 2021 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

## External Links - Introduction

- Sources and definitions: World Watch List Documentation - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>

# WWL 2021 Short country profile / Bangladesh

## Brief country details

Bangladesh: Population (2020 UN estimate)	Christians	Chr%
169,775,000	903,000	0.5

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

Bangladesh: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	67	31
WWL 2020	63	38
WWL 2019	58	48
WWL 2018	58	41
WWL 2017	63	26

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Bangladesh: Main persecution engines    Main drivers	
Dictatorial paranoia	Non-Christian religious leaders, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Government officials, Violent religious groups, Political parties
Islamic oppression	Non-Christian religious leaders, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Government officials, Violent religious groups, Political parties

Ethno-religious hostility	Non-Christian religious leaders, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Violent religious groups, Ethnic group leaders, Organized crime cartels or networks, Government officials, Political parties
Religious nationalism	Non-Christian religious leaders, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Violent religious groups, Ethnic group leaders, Government officials, Political parties

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

## Brief description of the persecution situation

Converts from a Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or an ethnic/tribal background suffer 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 faced with attacks and death-threats. Tribal Christians like the Santal, face an increasing double vulnerability (belonging to both an ethnic and religious minority) and struggle with land-grabbing issues and violence directed against them. Christians among the Muslim Rohingya, who fled to Bangladesh from Myanmar, are facing harassment and strong pressure from their community as well. In the WWL 2021 reporting period, they were the target of a violent attack by radical Islamic groups in the refugee camps.

## Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

**27 January 2020:** An attack by Islamic militants [destroyed](#) a makeshift building doubling as a meeting room for Rohingya Christians and 25 of their homes in one of the refugee camps in Cox's Bazaar and wounded several Christians. The next day, the militants returned and abducted at least three Christians, among them a father and daughter (Asia News, 4 February 2020).

**31 May 2020:** A house was attacked at night with a bomb in the village of Savar, northwest of Dhaka, where three Christians were living. The ensuing fire caused serious burns to a 30 year old woman and her five year old daughter who both died a few days later in hospital. The husband survived the attack as he was on night shift working in a clothing factory.

## External Links - Short country profile

- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: destroyed - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Santal-take-to-the-streets-to-demand-the-return-of-their-land-50631.html>

# WWL 2021: Keys to understanding / Bangladesh

## Link for general background information

- [Bangladesh country profile - BBC News](#)

## 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. Since then, 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.

Bangladesh has headed in an authoritarian direction 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. 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 (read: health) reasons (Benar News, 25 March 2020), the release was [extended](#) for six more months in September 2020 (Benar News, 15 September 2020). Security forces committed serious abuses including killings, “disappearances” and arbitrary arrests, with few investigations or official prosecutions being made.

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).

Christians normally are not 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 different religious minorities have scared the latter and made them act more cautiously. Although the series of killings appears to have ceased in the reporting period, on 11 June 2018, a Communist blogger “vocal against religious fundamentalism” was [shot dead](#) by suspected Islamic militants on motorbikes in Sirajdhikan, central Bangladesh (UCA News, 12 June 2018). Political violence



continues, between but also within parties, but rarely affects Christians. According to Human Rights organizations like [Odhikar](#), extra-judicial killings as well as lynchings are on the rise (Odhikar, Annual Report 2019, 8 February 2020). [Death threats](#) against atheist or human rights bloggers continue to be reported (DW, 24 August 2020).

The government is struggling to fight the radical Islamic groups which are growing stronger in influence, adding to the general insecurity. Before national elections in December 2018 took place, opposition BNP politician Khaleda Zia was sentenced to an additional two years in prison on corruption charges in October 2018. 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 hardline Islamist organization *Hefazat-e-Islami* in September 2020 may see the group fracture in two and, depending which side turns out stronger, even pitched against the government (Benar News, 21 September 2020). *Hefazat-e-Islami* had demanded the introduction of blasphemy laws in Bangladesh.

It has been an encouraging sign that the government tries to bring the murderers of secular journalists to justice, as in October 2019, it [indicted](#) eight members of a radical Islamic group for killing a secularist publisher in 2015 (AP, 13 October 2019). Although the state's fight against radical Islamic groups continues and saw some successes, new groups are emerging while others are going underground. This complicated security situation leaves Christians as a religious minority vulnerable and the surprise killing of a Christian woman and her daughter in May 2020 show that attacks can happen without any warning or apparent reason.

## Religious landscape

Bangladesh: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	903,000	0.5
Muslim	151,215,000	89.1
Hindu	15,500,000	9.1
Buddhist	1,240,000	0.7
Ethno-religionist	730,000	0.4

Jewish	200	0.0
Bahai	12,000	0.0
Atheist	13,100	0.0
Agnostic	130,000	0.1
Other	31,660	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

Home to over 150 million Muslims, 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).

Just over 9% of the population is Hindu and they suffer from attacks by radical Muslims as well. Christians are a tiny minority, experience marginalization and, if they belong to ethnic minorities, face a double vulnerability. Christian converts come quickly under pressure from either radical Islamic groups or the Islamic culture in their neighborhoods. They are facing much violence. Churches and all minority religions strive to stay clear of politics, although they notice a growing Islamic conservatism and radicalization in the country. Christian and other minorities are running several lobby groups.

## Economic landscape

According to [UNDP 2019 report](#) (page 300 onwards):

- **Gross National Income:** 4,057 USD (2011 PPP USD)
- **Poverty:** The rate of people living in multidimensional poverty is 16.7%, the rate of people vulnerable to it is 21.4%. 24.3% of the people are living below the national poverty line.
- **Remittances:** Remittances make up 5.65% of the total GDP

According to [World Bank's April 2020 update](#):

- Bangladesh is classified as a lower-middle income country
- **GDP per capita (PPP constant 2017 international USD):** 4,754
- **GDP growth rate per capita:** 7.0%
- **Poverty gap at 5.50 USD a day (2011 PPP):** 39.2%

Bangladesh is densely populated: It is the world's eighth most populous nation with over 169 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, and is often ranked as one of the world's most corrupt places, taking the 146th of 198 places in the [Corruption Perceptions Index 2019](#). Its political system has repeatedly been jolted by instability.

Bangladesh's territory is deeply vulnerable to the effects of climate change, 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). And yet, throughout all this, Bangladesh has also been a source of positive news. Bangladesh has been a success story with a constant positive development of many economic and social indicators. Having passed the threshold to lower-middle income status in 2014 (according to [World Bank criteria](#)) Bangladesh could become the only upper-middle income economy in South Asia by 2024. A key driver 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 getting 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.

However, the COVID-19 crisis has put this progress into 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 have been laid off and security nets are virtually non-existent. The timing of natural disasters striking right after a three-month lockdown has added to the challenge. 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.

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the [UNDP 2019 report](#) (page 300) and [Word Fact Book](#) (April 2020):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Bengali at least 98%, 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.
- **Main languages:** Bangla 98.8% (official, also known as Bengali), other 1.2% (2011 est.)
- **Urbanization rate:** 36.6%
- **Literacy rate:** 72.9% (of ages 15 and above), the mean years of schooling are 6.1.
- **Health and education indicators:** Per 10,000 people, Bangladesh has 5.3 physicians and 8 hospital beds. The pupil teacher ratio in elementary school is 30:1.

According to [World Bank's April 2020 update](#):

- **Population/age:** 27.2% of the population is under 14 years old, 5.2% is above 65.
- **Education:** The completion rate for primary education is 67.8% (most recent available data from 2010).
- **Unemployment:** 4.2%; the rate of vulnerable employment is 55.3%.
- **IDPs/Refugees:** According to the UN's [IOM](#), in 2017 at least one million migrant workers from Bangladesh were employed abroad. In Bangladesh, migration focused on the Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, according to the [UNHCR](#), more than 860,000 Rohingya refugees are living in Cox's Bazaar district alone.

According to the [UN Global Human Development Indicators](#) (2019):

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a score of 0.614, Bangladesh ranks 135th 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:** 72.3 years
- **Median age:** 27.6 years.
- **Gender inequality:** On the Gender Inequality Index, Bangladesh gets a score of 0.536 and ranks 129th of 162 listed countries.
- **Youth unemployment:** 27.4% (between 15 and 24 years of age)

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 the consequences of the pandemic may push [more than 16 million people](#) back into the category of being poor in 2020 (Asia News, 25 July 2020). Millions of clothing and other workers have lost their employment and this puts the rural areas under a double problem: Families there have usually been able to survive economically due to receiving remittances sent back by family members working in the cities. However, these funds are not available anymore. And the fall-back option of moving back to the rural areas to do farming has been severely limited by the natural disasters which have befallen the country in 2020. It seems likely that the 38.6% of the complete workforce employed in agriculture will struggle to survive as well. 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).

The approximately one million Muslim Rohingya refugees from neighboring Myanmar had already been putting the country's economy and social fabric under enormous stress since 2018, especially in the district of Cox's Bazar (see below). 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). To what extent these programs have been affected by the COVID-19 restrictions remains to be seen.

According to World Christian Database's 2020 estimates, just over 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. the Garo and the Santal) 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. These Christians face a double vulnerability, being tribal and Christian. They may experience a certain protection from the spread of the COVID-19 virus due to their remoteness, but they may also be discriminated against or even excluded from government assistance and support.

## Technological landscape

According to [World Internet Stats](#) (accessed July 2020):

- **Internet usage:** 60.7% penetration - survey date: February 2020
- **Facebook usage:** 20.5% penetration – survey date: January 2020

According to the [UNDP](#) (accessed 24 August 2020):

- **Mobile phones:** The subscription rate is 97.3 per 100 people, the internet penetration rate is given with 15.0%

According to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net Report 2020](#):

- Bangladesh registered a considerable decrease in freedom and is considered "partly free", dropping two points in the Freedom on the Net index. Concerning the media landscape, the report states: "The online media landscape in Bangladesh is vibrant, with a number of online outlets that give voice to a range of views. Even with the increased level of censorship during the coverage period, people are able to access a variety of local and international news sources that convey independent, balanced views in the main languages spoken in the country. The ability to access localized information and create content in Bengali has contributed to the popularity of local blog hosting services." There have been shutdowns of Internet services before important political events like the December 2018 elections.
- "Constraints on internet freedom in Bangladesh tightened during the coverage period. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the government ramped up its efforts to restrict the online space and suppress those criticizing the government's response. Authorities blocked critical websites, enhanced targeted violence, and arrested journalists and users alike. New investigative reporting also shed light on the government's capacity to manipulate content and deploy technical attacks. The ruling Awami League (AL) party has consolidated political power through sustained harassment of the opposition and those perceived to be allied with it, as well as of critical media and voices in civil society. Corruption is a serious problem, and anticorruption efforts have been weakened by politicized enforcement. Due process guarantees are poorly upheld and security forces carry out a range of human rights abuses with near impunity."

- Internet access is more readily available in urban areas and urbanization in Bangladesh is increasing, although the rates are lower than in some neighboring countries. Another limitation to Internet access is its affordability for the still large low-income segment of society. This is also true for the Christian minority, especially when it lives in rural areas and belongs to the ethnic minorities. Freedom House said: "During the coverage period, the cost for data packages decreased, although internet access remains expensive for many lower-income individuals. Gender disparity in internet access and limited connectivity in rural areas are pressing issues. The government also continued to prevent Rohingya refugees from purchasing SIM cards."

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: i) It has shown what potential power lies behind this digital security law; ii) It indicates how conservative the government is becoming; iii) It has the welcome side-effect of acting as a tool for wooing Islamic groups. Human Rights Watch reported about and [protested](#) the 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, e.g. in how it copes with the COVID-19 crisis (Benar News, 4 April 2020).

## Security situation

A dangerous new 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 played down the threat from transnational Islamic militants time and again, 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 terror analysts. 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. Security forces announced in September 2019 that Islamic militants have adapted their strategy, resorting to [lone wolf attacks](#), mainly targeting police posts (Benar News, 5 September 2019). But more than a year after these announcements, no such attacks have taken place. Instead, the emergence of an [al-Qaeda-affiliated group](#) named *HUJI-B* in October 2019 has been observed (Jamestown, 23 October 2019) and another group which was [banned](#) a month later (Benar News, 6 November 2019). 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 either.

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. While the government initially hoped to start repatriation to neighboring Myanmar in 2019 (after the December 2018 elections), the planned repatriation of the first Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh back to Myanmar did not make any progress in 2020, since

guaranteeing security for the returnees seems hardly possible. The fact that the Muslim radical insurgency group, ARSA, continues to attack security forces in Myanmar (as in [April 2019](#)), will not help the repatriation process (Radio Free Asia, 23 April 2019). It is hardly probable that any repatriation will take place while Myanmar is defending its actions before the International Court of Justice, which had ordered [provisional measures](#) to protect the Rohingya minority (New York Times, 23 January 2020), especially now that the ruling NLD in Myanmar turned out to be strengthened by elections.

On the one hand, Christians benefit from the generally stronger action by the authorities against radical Islamic groups and the reduction in killings. On the other hand, their security remains fragile as the incident from the end of May 2020 (reported above) showed. Additionally - although the problem this time does not involving high-profile attacks - 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). An example is the situation of the [Santal](#), where land-grabbing continues (Asia News, 22 July 2020). 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.

## Trends analysis

### 1) Political partisanship has led to an increase of *Dictatorial paranoia and Islamic oppression*

The Awami League consolidated its one-party rule, not least by limiting the freedoms of opinion and press and strongly acting against any dissent. One example has been the arrest of a 15 year old teenager for [criticizing](#) Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in a Facebook post (Human Rights Watch, 26 June 2020). She 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). In October 2019, clashes with violent protestors because of allegedly blasphemous Facebook posts [killed four people](#), which shows that radical views are still widespread and that the violence threshold is low (Asia News 21 October 2019). As the new leadership of *Hefazat-e-Islam* is leaning [towards the opposition](#) BNP, the movement may split, but even then it will still continue to be a powerful force which the government will need to cope with (Benar News, 19 November 2020).

### 2) The consequence for the Christian minority - a very high level of persecution

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 different religious backgrounds. The situation is particularly bad for Christian converts from a Muslim background. Since the large attack on the Artisan Bakery in July 2016, the Islamic State group (IS) has claimed a number of attacks through its media affiliates, but the government has consistently denied any IS presence in the country. Other attacks have been claimed by local Islamist groups.

Christians continue to live in fear of possible attacks, although the immediate threat has decreased somewhat due to a strong crackdown on 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 government has made only limited progress in curbing radical Islamic groups. It is not only losing support from some parts of society, it is also facing the challenge of an influx of radical international Muslims and has to deal with their local affiliates. As long as the ruling party continues to link all Islamic militancy to the opposition party and to woo Islamic radical groups in order to gain votes, it will be difficult to find a solution. What one observer said at the end of 2019 can be repeated for 2020: It has been a(nother) [lost year](#) in terms of human rights and justice (UCA News, 18 December 2019). There are also reports that the government continues to give in to sensitivities Islamists could have, such as when they [banned a novel](#) writing about sexual abuse at a *qawmi* madrassah (Benar News, 1 September 2020). In any case, the fact that [tens of thousands of supporters](#) turned up for the funeral of *Hefazat-e-Islam* founder Ahmad Shafi, who also started the *qawmi* madrassah movement, shows that the radical interpretation of Islam is widespread in Bangladesh (UCA News, 23 September 2020).

## External Links - Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: Bangladesh country profile - BBC News - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12650940>
- Recent history: temporarily released - <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/Khaleda-Zia-freed-03252020133058.html>
- Recent history: extended f - <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/BD-Zia-09152020163138.html>
- Recent history: not need to fear - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46718393>
- Political and legal landscape: shot dead - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/critic-of-religions-gunned-down-in-bangladesh/82551>
- Political and legal landscape: Odhikar - [http://odhikar.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Annual-HR-Report-2019\\_Eng.pdf](http://odhikar.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Annual-HR-Report-2019_Eng.pdf)
- Political and legal landscape: Death threats - <https://www.dw.com/en/blogger-faces-death-threats-for-criticizing-islam/a-54678246>
- Political and legal landscape: religion of the country is Islam - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Sheikh-Hasina:-Whoever-insults-Islam-will-be-punished-according-to-the-law-45387.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Master's degree - <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2018/08/13/bangladesh-readies-new-law-to-recognise-qawmi-madrassa-degrees>
- Political and legal landscape: death - <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/BD-politics-religion-09212020163348.html>
- Political and legal landscape: indicted - <https://apnews.com/f11b1a9215b6427eb59aa181d210829f>
- Religious landscape description: school textbooks - <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/22/world/asia/bangladesh-textbooks-radical-islam.html>
- Religious landscape description: ban chapters on - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/bangladesh-govt-bans-jihad-from-madrassa-texts/80639>
- Religious landscape description: jihad - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/bangladesh-govt-bans-jihad-from-madrassa-texts/80639>
- Religious landscape description: 560 mosques - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/bangladeshs-560-mosques-project-comes-under-fire/82315>
- Economic landscape: UNDP 2019 report - <http://www.hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf>



- Economic landscape: World Bank's April 2020 update - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bangladesh>
- Economic landscape: Corruption Perceptions Index 2019 - <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi>
- Economic landscape: heavy flooding - <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jul/24/a-critical-situation-bangladesh-in-crisis-as-monsoon-floods-follow-super-cyclone>
- Economic landscape: World Bank criteria - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bangladesh/overview>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNDP 2019 report - <http://www.hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: Word Fact Book - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/attachments/summaries/BG-summary.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Bank's April 2020 update - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bangladesh>
- Social and cultural landscape: IOM - <https://bangladesh.iom.int/sites/default/files/publication/Annual%20Migration%20Report%202017%20-%20Final%20Layout%20-%202020%20June%20%202019.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNHCR - <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/77873>
- Social and cultural landscape: UN Global Human Development Indicators - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/BGD>
- Social and cultural landscape: more than 16 million people - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Coronavirus:-Social-malaise-rising-with-unemployment-50651.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: major challenge - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/education-a-distant-dream-for-millions-in-bangladesh/89451>
- Social and cultural landscape: provide formal education - <https://in.reuters.com/article/myanmar-rohingya-education-idINKBN1ZS25T>
- Technological landscape: World Internet Stats - <https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#bd>
- Technological landscape: UNDP - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/BGD>
- Technological landscape: Freedom on the Net Report 2020: - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bangladesh/freedom-net/2020>
- Technological landscape: block access - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/bangladeshs-moral-police-turn-the-screw/84604>
- Technological landscape: protested - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/08/bangladesh-online-surveillance-control>
- Technological landscape: two day blocking - <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/blocked-update-04032020120938.html>
- Security situation: Summer 2019 - <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/new-video-08122019151130.html>
- Security situation: lone wolf attacks - <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/lone-wolf-09052019145951.html>
- Security situation: al-Qaeda-affiliated group - <https://jamestown.org/program/al-qaeda-linked-group-huji-b-attempts-to-regroup-in-bangladesh/>
- Security situation: banned - <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/bangladesh-militants-11062019180157.html>
- Security situation: planning another attack - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/militant-threats-put-bangladesh-on-alert-ahead-of-eid/88943>
- Security situation: April 2019 - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/myanmar-arsa-attacks-police-04232019165530.html>
- Security situation: provisional measures - <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/23/world/asia/myanmar-rohingya-genocide.html>
- Security situation: elusive peace - <https://international.la-croix.com/news/unfulfilled-promises-and-elusive-peace-on-bangladesh-hills/11436>
- Security situation: Santal - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Santal-take-to-the-streets-to-demand-the-return-of-their-land-50631.html>
- Security situation: attacks and abductions - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Santal-take-to-the-streets-to-demand-the-return-of-their-land-50631.html>
- Trends analysis: criticizing - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/26/bangladesh-arrests-teenage-child-criticizing-prime-minister>

- Trends analysis: religion of the country is Islam - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Sheikh-Hasina:-Whoever-insults-Islam-will-be-punished-according-to-the-law-45387.html>
- Trends analysis: killed four people - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Bhola,-clashes-over-blasphemous-Facebook-post-leave-four-dead-48322.html>
- Trends analysis: towards the opposition - <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/faith-analysis-11192020164548.html>
- Trends analysis: lost year - <https://www.ucanews.org/news/a-dispassionate-farewell-to-a-solemn-year-in-bangladesh/86849>
- Trends analysis: banned a novel - <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/bangladesh-book-ban-09012020173337.html>
- Trends analysis: tens of thousands of supporters - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/the-rise-fall-and-legacy-of-bangladeshs-islamic-figurehead/89635>

## WWL 2021: 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 type-faces 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	150	0.0
Catholic	420,000	46.5
Protestant	360,000	39.9
Independent	310,000	34.3

Unaffiliated	3,000	0.3
Doubly-affiliated Christians	- 190,000	-21.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>903,150</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	300,000	33.2
Renewalist movement	325,000	36.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

**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).

## WWL 2021: Persecution Dynamics / Bangladesh

### Reporting period

1 October 2019 - 30 September 2020

### Position on the World Watch List

Bangladesh: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	67	31
WWL 2020	63	38

WWL 2019	58	48
WWL 2018	58	41
WWL 2017	63	26

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods

In the WWL 2021 reporting period, there was a further increase of 3.7 points in comparison to WWL 2020. This increase has three parts: One third comes from an increase in violence, where a Christian mother and daughter were killed and the Christians among the Rohingya refugees from Myanmar have been violently attacked within the camps, both from fellow refugees and from insurgency groups such as ARSA. A further reason for the increase in score is the improved reporting from the tribal areas. Access is still limited, but more reports were obtained from Christians within the area during the WWL 2021 reporting period, which led, among other things, to an increase of 1.2 points in *Church life*. All other spheres saw a light increase, contributing to the last third of the overall increase. 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	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	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 (Strong), blended with Islamic oppression (Strong):**

Politics in Bangladesh is family business and at the moment, it is 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. The opposition decided to form an alliance in which the leader of the (mostly secular) Bangladesh National Party has strengthened her Islamic ties and has begun to emphasize the country's Islamic foundations. In the end, this coalition did not lead to any tangible results in the December 2018 election and for the time being, parliamentary opposition in Bangladesh is virtually non-existent. 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 Christians 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. These groups are watching minorities, especially converts. They are instilling fear and many of them are inspired by international Islamic groups like 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 fact that the government is fighting Islamic groups which are known to have connections to the opposition party does not help bring calm to the volatile political situation.

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. Since around 300,000 Rohingya were already living in Bangladesh before this, this brings their number to more than one million. They are living in desperate circumstances with little hope of returning in the near future and are putting a great strain on Bangladesh, which is still one of the world's poorest countries. The insurgency group "Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army" (ARSA), which attacked 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. Despite all promises, it does not seem likely that Myanmar will take back the refugees in the next months; especially as fighting in Rakhine State in Myanmar continues (although government forces are now placing more emphasis on combatting an ethnic minority Buddhist insurgency there) and discrimination and fighting against the Muslim minority has not ceased (see WWL Country Dossier Myanmar).

### Religious nationalism - Buddhist and Hinduist (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 and Buddhists are found mostly among the indigenous people groups concentrated in Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts, bordering India and Myanmar. Among these people groups, the tribal Chakma people are the most well-known. Over the past years, an increasing number of Chakma have converted to Christianity. This has caused Buddhist and tribal leaders to put more pressure on converts. This is not only done by family, friends and community, but also by radical Buddhists aiming to strengthen local Buddhist and indigenous groups in resisting Christianity. In majority Hindu communities, leaders and families put pressure on Christian converts to return to Hinduism.

The ethnic peoples of Bangladesh refer to ethnic minorities in Chittagong Hill Tracts (south-eastern), Sylhet Division (north-eastern), Rajshahi Division (north-western), and Mymensingh District (north-central) areas of the country. Ethnic minorities of Bangladesh have their own cultural traditions and languages. As the Chakma, Tripura and Marma are tribal groups, *Religious nationalism* is mixed with *Ethno-religious hostility* and *Clan oppression*. 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.

### Drivers of persecution

Bangladesh: Drivers of Persecution per engine	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	WEAK	-	-	-	STRONG	WEAK
Government officials	Strong	Medium	Medium	-	-	-	-	Strong	-
Ethnic group leaders	-	Medium	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Very strong	Very strong	Very strong	-	-	-	-	Very strong	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	Strong	Strong	Strong	-	-	-	-	Strong	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Strong	Very strong	Very strong	-	-	-	-	Strong	-
One's own (extended) family	Very strong	Very strong	Very strong	-	-	-	-	Very strong	-

<b>Bangladesh: Drivers of Persecution per engine</b>	<b>IO</b>	<b>RN</b>	<b>ERH</b>	<b>CO</b>	<b>CDP</b>	<b>CPCO</b>	<b>SI</b>	<b>DPA</b>	<b>OCC</b>
	STRONG	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	WEAK	-	-	-	STRONG	WEAK
Political parties	Medium	Medium	Medium	-	-	-	-	Medium	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

### Drivers of Islamic oppression, blended with Dictatorial paranoia:

- **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.
- **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.
- **Violent religious groups (Strong):** Local radical Islamic groups, specifically *Jamaatul Mujahedin Bangladesh* (JMB), *Jamaat-e-Islami*, *Hefazat-e-Islami* and *Ahle Sunnat* are actively 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 including Christians (especially leaders and evangelists) and converts. It remains to be seen if the recent leadership transition within *Hefazat-e-Islami* will lead to more violence or give birth to new groups.
- **Government officials (Strong):** Government officials are drivers of *Islamic oppression* often combined with *Dictatorial paranoia*, since they are serving the ruling government. 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 (Strong):** Although incidents of mob violence against Christians has decreased over the last months, also due to the COVID-19 crisis, normal citizens still perceive conversion to Christianity as something which is socially undesirable and which places an individual outside society. Therefore, citizens, especially in rural areas, ostracize converts. 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*. Further, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), the opposition party, although weakened, puts pressure on minority religious groups (including Christians) as these are seen as belonging to the ruling party's camp. In this tense political climate, parties may not act against Christians themselves, but may give tacit approval or support for vigilante and violent groups connected with them.

**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 from their religious background. As their groups are in a minority position in Bangladesh and perceive themselves increasingly standing against a growing radical interpretation of Islam, the conversion of people out of their group feels like an even further weakening. Thus they call for converts to be placed under considerable pressure to give up their new faith.
- **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 weakening the whole religious group. Encouraged by religious leaders, neighbors and friends put pressure on the 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.
- **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.



- **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 (Medium):** 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.

## 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. In the last three years, another hotspot developed when Bangladesh became host to more than 700,000 Islamic refugees from neighboring Myanmar. Most of them are located in Cox Bazar district, at the south-eastern tip of Bangladesh. The country struggles to take care of them, even with the help of the international community. 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 from the important textile sector. They face being observed and threatened by Islamic militants.

**Historical Christian communities:** This group includes the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Bangladesh (Anglican). They are frequently threatened and watched.

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

**Non-traditional Christian communities:** This group includes Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations. The Assemblies of God, for instance, mainly gather for worship in house churches. They are frequently threatened and at times violently attacked.

## The Persecution pattern

The WWL 2021 Persecution pattern for Bangladesh shows:

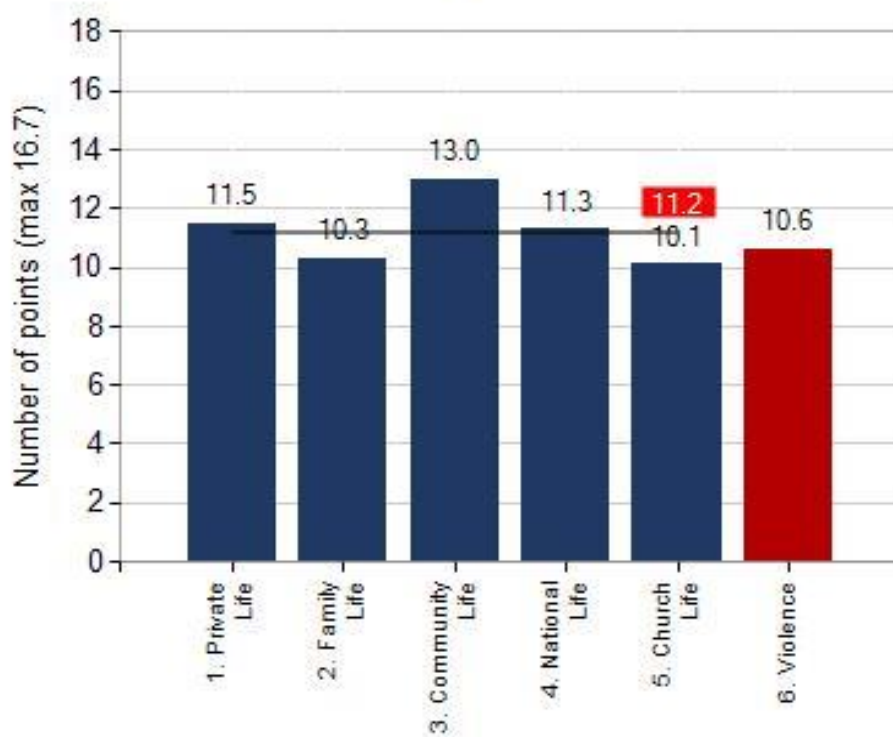
- The pressure on Christians in Bangladesh increased in all *spheres of life*, causing the average pressure to rise from a score of 10.7 in WWL 2020 to 11.2 points 2021. This reflects rising pressure on all Christians, but especially on converts to Christianity. The increasingly difficult situation of such converts among the Rohingya refugees who fled Myanmar in 2017 has added to an increase in scores in the WWL 2021 reporting period (also adding to the violence score, since they experienced attacks). A further reason for an increase over all

spheres is that more information was obtained on converts with a religious minority background.

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- Pressure is strongest in the *Community* and *Private* spheres, where converts are particularly affected, but all Christians face pressure in the *National* and *Church* spheres. The latter is also the sphere in which pressure increased the most.

Violence against Christians increased from 9.4 points in WWL 2020 to 10.6 points in WWL 2021. There were two killings, and in the WWL 2021 reporting period, the Rohingya Christians faced violent attacks from radical Islamic groups within the refugee camps.

WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern for Bangladesh



## 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 2021 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: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

### Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

**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.). (3.25 points)**

Converts live in fear and often prefer to keep their conversion a secret from their family. Those who choose to identify themselves are regularly harassed, bullied, often threatened and are 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.

**Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.25 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 some even advocate for death.

**Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.00 points)**

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 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. For any Christian, Buddhist or Hindu who wishes to become a Muslim, this procedure is almost a formality. In contrast, for a Muslim to become a Christian, it is normal to encounter pressure from the lawyer, who sometimes even refuses (illegally) to register the conversion. As Islam is the state religion and the religion of the vast majority, Muslims who convert to Christianity face strong societal and family pressure in addition to such legal issues.

**Block 1.9: It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians. (3.00 points)**

Especially for new converts, it has been very risky to meet with other Christians, even more so when they come from the outside like 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. This is not only true for converts from a Muslim background, but also applies to those from a Buddhist or Hindu background.

## 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. (3.50 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. In many cases, school teachers are simply not teaching Christianity, so that parents have to educate them at home. In one case in the WWL 2021 reporting period, Christians were mocked by the teachers when they refused to join other religious education lessons. In another case, a Christian had to take her exam for Christianity studies outside the school and was not permitted to use the exam hall. Children of converts sometimes experience that their parent's conversion is not accepted and they have to attend Islamic classes. In many cases, Christian children are forced to study non-Christian teachings and use Islamic textbooks at school.

**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 foreigners and secondly, it seems they deliberately want to make life difficult for Christian children and especially convert Christians.

**Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (3.25 points)**

For historical churches, it is usually no problem to conduct baptisms as long as they are done 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. Converts are usually sent to other cities or areas to be baptized. In the WWL 2021 reporting period, there have been cases where planned baptisms had to be cancelled and in one case a pastor had to go into hiding, after a mob tried to stop a baptism and he narrowly escaped.

**Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (3.00 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. But 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. There have been reports about this for convert children from a Buddhist background, too.

## Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

**Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (3.50 points)**

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 also one reason why Christian activities are monitored, especially by the local community. Even when traditional churches organize programs inside or outside of the church, neighbors are always curious. This has a downside, however. Christians, especially converts, have also been monitored by local leaders, vigilante groups and violent groups. In the WWL 2021 reporting period, Christian gatherings have been visited by such groups who check what materials are used and threaten to close the meetings, also demanding that those present stop coming in the future. Also, some imams have been warning against Christians and inciting crowds during Friday prayers. Further, where Christian meetings are considered too large or are seen as carrying out proselytizing, local residents have called in the police to interrogate the Christian leaders involved.

**Block 3.7: Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith. (3.50 points)**

Christian men and women are often pressured to renounce their faith. Islamists target vulnerable families and offer them incentives, such as food, money and education for their children if they convert. The pressure to recant is great in poorer areas. There have also been reports of whole mobs threatening groups of converts, forcing them to recant their faith.

**Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)**

Article 28 (1) of the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh proclaims, "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth" and Article 29 ensures 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. And if Christians do gain employment, frequently they will not be promoted or given benefits coming with the job. Although some Christians have made it into high positions in the country, in general, they are disadvantaged by the country's civil service [quota system](#) (UCA News, 8 March 2018).

**Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.50 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, as there is the widely perceived misunderstanding that people 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.

## Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

**Block 4.4: Christians have been hindered in travelling for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)**

All visitors (including citizens of Bangladesh) to any village in Chittagong Hill Tracts must register with the military authorities. In registering, they have to provide the purpose for their visit. If it is for religious purposes, permission will not be granted. This affects all Christians in this region. The same is true for the Rohingya refugee camps.

**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. These NGOs are denied permission for their proposed projects from time to time by the NGO Affairs Bureau (under the Prime Minister's Office) and have been subject to escalating harassment and surveillance.

**Block 4.14: Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished. (3.50 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 and there is a high degree of

unwillingness on the part of the authorities to even start proper investigations. There was an incident in the WWL 2021 reporting period, when a mob attacked a group of converts, demanding they return to their old faith. When the converts approached the police, they were told to return to Islam, otherwise the police could do nothing to help them.

**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. 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 more free in this respect, as are Christians living in urban areas.

## Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

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

The monitoring is not usually carried out by the state, but by local radical Islamic groups or wider society, which 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 take a page from Prime Minister Hazina's speech, where she said that whoever hurts religious sentiments will be punishable by law.

**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, they cannot be openly integrated into the church as converts. Once their status is known, they and the church will face trouble; attacks have been reported in the WWL 2021 reporting period.

**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 names and details of all participants and key leaders of churches through informers. Due to the measures imposed to combat COVID-19, many church activities had to be carried out online, which was not always possible in rural areas with little, if any, internet access.

### 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 growing 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.

## 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. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given. (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 1000 could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain.) In cases where it is clear that (many) more Christians are affected, but a concrete number could be given according to the number of incidents reported, the number given has to be understood as being an absolutely minimum figure. The symbol "x" denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security considerations.*

Bangladesh: Violence Block question	WWL 2021	WWL 2020
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	2	0
6.2 How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	90	14
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	1	20
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?	143	7
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	4	4
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	6	5
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	2	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	284	100



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?	78	50
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?	4	8
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	91	1600
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	0	0

For the WWL 2021 reporting period:

- **Christians killed:** For details, see "Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period" above.
- **Christians attacked:** Christians, especially converts from all backgrounds, are facing attacks by the 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 old faith. There has also been an attack against the Christian minority in the Kutupalong refugee camp in January 2020, after which twelve Christians had to be taken to hospital.
- **Christians arrested:** There are reports of at least 56 Christians who were detained or arrested and imprisoned. However, details on this cannot be published for security reasons.
- **Churches attacked:** At least 90 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 included the Kutupalong refugee camp. No details can be given for security reasons.
- **Christians abducted:** On 27 January 2020, a Rohingya Christian pastor and his 14-year-old daughter were abducted from their home in a refugee camp. His whereabouts are still unknown at the time of writing, his daughter has reportedly been forcibly married to an ARSA fighter.

## 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.

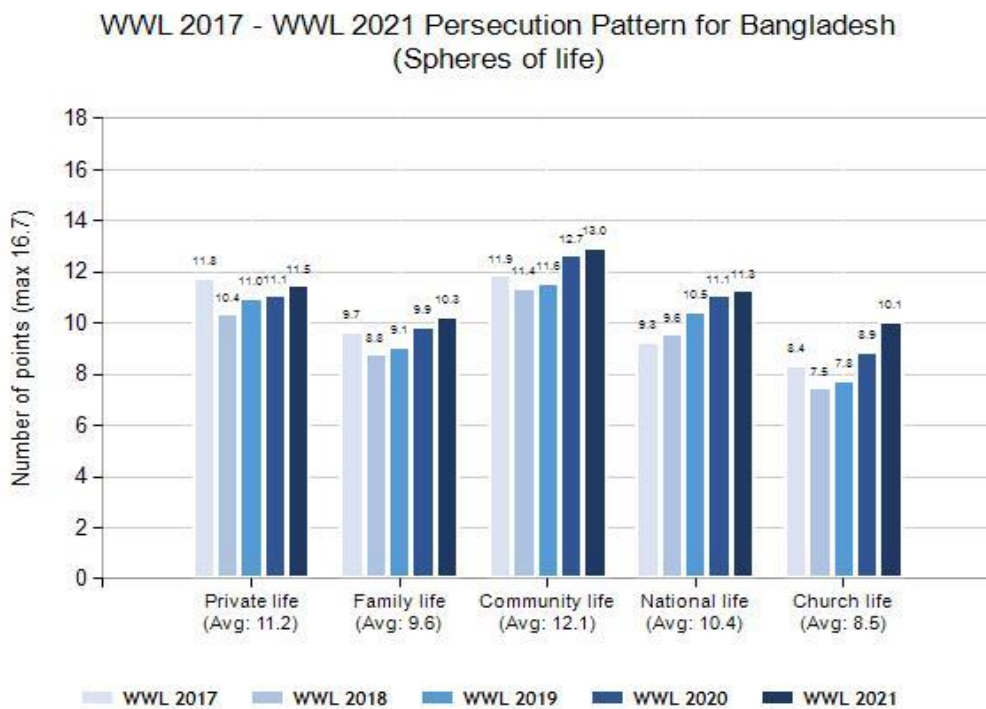
### 5 Year trends: Average pressure

In the table below, it can be seen that in the first three reporting periods (WWL 2017 - WWL 2019), the average pressure on Christians was stable within the range of 9.5 - 10.2 points. However, WWL 2020 saw a considerable increase to 10.7 points, continued by a further increase to 11.2 points in WWL 2021.

Bangladesh: WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2021	11.2
2020	10.7
2019	10.0
2018	9.5
2017	10.2

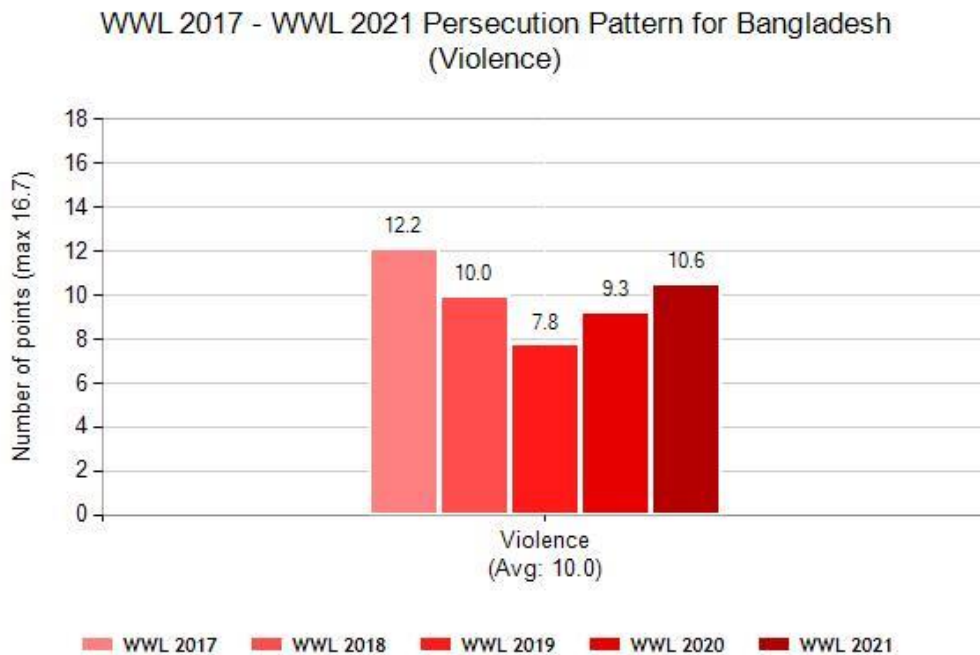
### 5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

In the chart below, the levels of pressure in all *spheres of life* (and in violence) show a spike in WWL 2017, due to increased open pressure by radical Islamic groups and accompanied by the killing of a number of Christians. Following this spike, the pressure on Christians gradually increased again over all spheres of life, partly due to the influx of Rohingya refugees in 2017 and the increased pressure reported on the Christian converts among them. The level of pressure in all spheres except *Private life* is now higher than it had been five years ago.



## 5 Year trends: Violence against Christians

As can be seen in the chart below, having spiked in WWL 2017, the level of violence then decreased in the next two reporting periods reflecting the fact that the authorities began to act decisively against violent Islamic militants. However, WWL 2020 saw an increase in the level of violence again. This increase continued in WWL 2021. The attack against Rohingya Christians contributed to the increase.



## Gender-specific religious persecution Female

Female Pressure Points
Abduction
Forced marriage
Violence – physical
Violence – psychological
Violence – sexual

Bangladesh is culturally class-based and patriarchal. Despite the country being led by female politicians for many years, Bangladesh is still a country where it is normally dangerous and difficult to be a woman. It has one of the highest child marriage rates in the world, with [59% of girls](#) being married before they turn 18 (Girls Not Brides). 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 the highest in the world.

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. Conversion is viewed as a betrayal of their culture and religion. Because women and girls are mostly dependent on males, sexual assault, rape and forced marriage are common forms of religious persecution. They are not only abused physically, but also mentally. Violence against women and girls in Bangladesh has [reportedly](#) increased during the COVID-19 crisis and female Christians have been vulnerable to these forms of persecution (Human Rights Watch, 29 Oct 2020). For example, in the Spring of 2020 a female convert was abducted on her way home. Due to the lockdown, her parents could not search for her, and police took longer to rescue her. She had been tortured and raped for several months by the time she was found.

Abduction and forced marriage remain a significant threat facing Christian women and girls, including in [refugee camps](#) (Human Rights Watch, 13 Feb 2020) . As a country expert explained: “Abduction of young girls from minority communities, indiscriminate rape, and conversion under threats are rampant and used as tools for persecution.” Many kidnapped girls remain missing and law enforcement has been inadequate. Victims of sexual abuse struggle to move on from the trauma, particularly if they become pregnant by their abuser. A Christian girl who was abducted, raped and impregnated describes her struggles: “What a cruel inhumanity this is! My future is finished. I am hopeless, frustrated and depressed. I cannot show my face to my friends, relatives, nobody.” “We love Jesus,” she added, “And I paid the most for it.”

On the other hand, more and more women are being empowered to join the [workforce](#) and are therefore gradually gaining more independence (Georgetown, 2020).

## Gender-specific religious persecution Male

Male Pressure Points
False charges
Forced to flee town/country
Imprisonment by government
Violence – physical
Violence – psychological

One result of the patriarchal cultural norms in Bangladesh is that males generally become Christians first, followed by their families later. As leaders within their families, men and boys often face persecution first. They are commonly beaten for ‘betraying their culture and religion’ and threatened. Pressure from community members and local Muslim leaders has also caused

men to flee from their homes. One convert – who was found – was tortured and forced to renounce his faith. Church leaders in particular are victim to false accusations and imprisoned for “converting Muslim people to Christianity with money.” They have also been falsely charged with rape.

Reflecting the severity of the pressures that converts face, a teenage boy took his own life in early 2020 due to the pressure he received from his parents, which including being forced to worship Buddhist idols. (Please note that suicides do not contribute to the WWL scores).

As men are the main providers, if they lose their job because of their faith - or are imprisoned - it will affect their whole family. The additional economic hardships of the COVID-19 crisis has pushed many families to breaking point.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the [US State Department’s IRF 2019 report](#) (p.1):

- "Members of religious minorities, including Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians, who were sometimes also members of ethnic minorities, stated the government remained ineffective in preventing forced evictions and land seizures stemming from land disputes. The government continued to place law enforcement personnel at religious sites, festivals, and events considered possible targets for violence. In October protesters clashed with police and attacked a Hindu temple in response to the October 20 arrests of two Muslims in Bhola, who were accused of hacking the Facebook account of a Hindu student in an extortion scheme. There were more than 100 injuries in the clash, and police killed four persons in what they stated was self-defense. In August, according to multiple press reports, police found the body of Buddhist monk Amrita Nanda, vice principal of Gyanaratna Buddhist Monastery, under a railway bridge in Comilla, approximately 100 kilometers (62 miles) from Dhaka. According to media accounts, Nanda’s throat was slit. Buddhist community members said Nanda was returning to his hometown from Dhaka."

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). Hindus are the second largest religious group in the country behind Sunni Muslims. Hindus are subject to discrimination and violence, and some women and girls have been forcefully converted. There are cases where Muslims have taken possession of their land and turned Hindu families into refugees. Indigenous people and religious minorities have been disproportionately affected by violence resulting from land-grabbing and the resulting displacement.

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. When one Hindu activist told US President Donald Trump about the situation of religious minorities and spoke of "[persecution](#)" during the Ministerial for Religious Freedom in July 2019 in Washington, she sparked outrage at home and was seen as tarnishing the image of Bangladesh (Lowy Institute, 8 August 2019).

## Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

### Islamic oppression

As long as Bangladesh is struggling with radical Islamic groups from inside the country and 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, 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 not-registered, "private" 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). Politics in the country frequently involves the use of violent means and often enough innocent by-standers suffer and are even killed.

### Religious nationalism - Buddhist and Hinduist

Given that Bangladesh has sizable Hindu and Buddhist minorities as well, 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

Elections on 30 December 2018 saw a landslide victory for Sheikh Hasina's Awami League and made her the longest ruling prime minister in Bangladesh's history. The fact that the opposition (and international observers) doubted the fairness of elections points to a continuation of the Persecution engine *Dictatorial paranoia*. Christians as a minority may find themselves in the crosshairs of political infighting. 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 is now prosecuted in Bangladesh for alleged corruption and claimed [political asylum](#) in Canada in July 2019 (Benar News, 26 July 2019). An arrest warrant has been issued against the former Chief Justice and the court case is [proceeding](#) (BDNews24, 19 August 2020). This Persecution engine seems therefore here to stay: Whoever is perceived as a threat by the rulers, will be targeted, no matter how high his position.

## External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere: quota system - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/bangladeshs-unfair-civil-service-quota-system-under-fire/81722>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: 59% of girls - <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/bangladesh/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: reportedly - <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/29/i-sleep-my-own-deathbed/violence-against-women-and-girls-bangladesh-barriers>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: refugee camps - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/13/christians-abducted-attacked-bangladesh-refugee-camp>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: workforce - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: US State Department's IRF 2019 report: - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bangladesh/>
- 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: "persecution" - <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/down-and-out-dhaka>
- 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: proceeding - <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2020/08/19/four-accused-in-ex-chief-justice-sinha-money-laundering-case-get-bail-after-surrender>

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on World Watch Research's Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) and on the World Watch Monitor website:

- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Bangladesh>
- <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/Bangladesh>