

WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

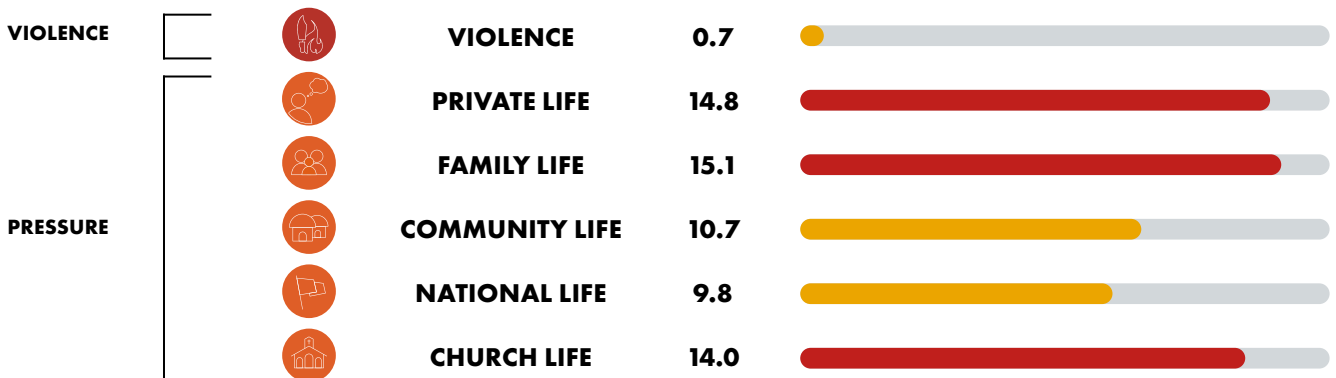
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

BRUNEI

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
50



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

Converts from Islam face pressure from their families, communities, and the state, with efforts made to bring them back to Islam. For example, the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) may arrange meetings between the convert and an Islamic religious counselor. If the convert does not return to Islam, leaving the faith is punishable under Sharia Penal Law. While there is a moratorium on the death penalty, sentences of up to 30 years in prison and whipping remain legal. This threat drives many conversions underground. Churches are also affected: they risk fines or imprisonment for incorporating converts into their communities. Society more broadly is affected by the growing implementation of Sharia law, including mandatory Islamic education starting at age three ([The Star Malaysia, 25 October 2023](#)). Non-traditional Christian communities cannot register as churches. Instead, they must operate as companies, societies, or family centers and are treated as secular entities, required to submit annual reports to the government.

Quick facts

LEADER

Sultan of Brunei Hassanal Bolkiah

POPULATION

459,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

53,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Absolute Monarchy or Sultanate



Context

| Religious context | Number of adherents | % of adherents in country |
|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| Christians | 53,000 | 11.5 |
| Muslims | 271,000 | 59.0 |
| Ethno religionists | 45,600 | 9.9 |
| Others | 89,400 | 19.6 |
| | Total | 100% |

Source²

In Brunei, the Sultan rules as absolute monarch, serving as chief of state, prime minister, finance minister, minister of the interior, defense minister, and head of religion. The Sultan is widely revered, and his public devotion to Islam—demonstrated by regular attendance at Friday prayers in mosques across the nation—reinforces his image as both a political and spiritual leader. Brunei has been under a State of Emergency since 1962, granting the Sultan sweeping legislative authority and further consolidating his power. This unprecedented centralization of authority leaves no room for democratic accountability or religious plurality. This fusion of religious and state authority has serious consequences for Brunei's Christian minority. As the driving force behind the introduction of the Syariah Penal Code, the Sultan has overseen the introduction of laws that criminalize certain aspects of Christian faith and practice. With no institutional separation between religion and government, Christians have no legal or political channels to challenge laws that threaten their freedom.

The national philosophy is Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB), a blend of Malay and Islamic cultural values, guarded by the monarchy. May 2014 saw the introduction of the Sharia Penal Code (which also applies to non-Muslims); however, implementation did not happen until 2019 ([Attorney General's Chambers Brunei, 2018](#)). So far, no cases against religious minorities have been reported. In November 2023, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religious Affairs introduced a new policy integrating Islamic religious education into the general curriculum for students in Years 2-6 across public, private, and international schools. Non-Muslim students are no longer exempt; they are required to attend subjects like Jawi script, Islamic moral values (Akhlaq), and Islamic history (Sejarah Islam).

Ethnically, Malay Bruneians comprise 57% of the population and are presumed to be Muslim. The Chinese population is Buddhist and Christian (Christians make up 12% of the overall population). Christians are free to worship, although church leaders are under constant surveillance and preaching is monitored.

Apart from the Roman Catholic and Anglican Church, there are a few Protestant churches in Brunei, which also serve expatriate communities (for instance, Filipinos, and Indians).

¹ Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

² Other refers to all the rest to make up 100%: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

ISLAMIC OPPRESSION BLENDED WITH DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

Sharia law, in its civil and administrative dimension, was fully implemented prior to Brunei's independence in 1984. However, the introduction of the criminal Sharia Penal Code in 2013, with full implementation in 2019, meant the introduction of provisions for non-Muslims with hudud penalties for religious propagation, moral offenses and public indecency.

The current blurred boundary between religious and civil law has increased fear and self-censorship among Christians, especially converts and unregistered house churches. The government has offered incentives to prospective converts to Islam (especially from indigenous communities), including help with housing and welfare. Conversions to Islam are widely celebrated, including in national newspapers. Converts to Christianity risk severe repercussions. Family and community members can easily create trouble for converts to Christianity by reporting them to the security department (the KDN), which happens frequently.

A government body, the Malay Islamic Monarchy Supreme Council, is tasked with promoting the MIB philosophy and ensuring it is enshrined in laws and policies. This philosophy, which positions Malay identity, Islam, and loyalty to the monarchy as core pillars of national life, underpins government initiatives—such as the official goal of making Brunei a “zikir nation,” one that continuously remembers and obeys Allah. The continued state of emergency sustains an authoritarian system with influence over all areas of life, including religious councils, the education system and the media that helps to uphold the regime's ideological and political control: dissent is both rare and risky.

How the situation varies by region

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

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

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

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

This includes the Roman Catholic and Anglican Church. They are strictly monitored and must exercise caution in ensuring they do not criticize the Sultan, though they experience less pressure than newer Protestant groups and converts.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Converts from a Muslim background face strong pressure from family and friends, as conversion is illegal.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

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



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Christian women in Brunei face compounded restrictions under the Syariah Penal Code and strict cultural norms. They are pressured to conform to Islamic dress codes, often forced to wear the hijab in universities and government institutions. Female converts risk disownment, house arrest, or forced rehabilitation programs, and unmarried women may be coerced into marriage to Muslim men. Married converts risk losing custody of their children. Discrimination in schools and workplaces deepens their vulnerability, while laws banning non-Muslim propagation severely limit Christian women's freedom of faith.

Female typical pressure points:

- Denied custody of children
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

MEN

Christian men in Brunei who convert from Islam risk severe persecution under the Syariah Penal Code, where conversion is illegal and punishable by death. Male converts are often disowned, expelled from their homes, and isolated, losing vital social support. They endure beatings, humiliation, and threats from religious authorities, who pressure them to recant their faith, sometimes under the threat of imprisonment. Christian students face discrimination and verbal abuse, from teachers and fellow students. Conversion brings deep stigma, affecting entire families and communities.

Male typical pressure points:

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



WWL 5 year trend

| WWL Year | Position on Open Doors World Watch List | Persecution rounded score out of 100 |
|----------|---|--------------------------------------|
| 2026 | 50 | 65 |
| 2025 | 48 | 66 |
| 2024 | 44 | 66 |
| 2023 | 46 | 65 |
| 2022 | 46 | 64 |

The overall score went down one point. Although the violence score rose very slightly, there was a decrease of 1 point in pressure in National life. Christians and other religious minorities face significant pressure and punitive measures under Sharia law and there are extremely high levels of self-censorship. Converts from Islam are a particular target for being brought back to their original faith.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- The threat of harsh laws and punishments creates a climate of fear and self-censorship, where even everyday actions, such as quoting a text in class, praying quietly at work, or posting on social media, can lead to accusations, job loss, or charges of blasphemy.
- A student was accused of being disrespectful to the majority religion for sharing a fact during class. The accusation didn't go far, but it reminded him how easily things can be misunderstood and how cautious he needs to be.
- A person was asked to resign from her job after praying for food.
- A person was accused of blasphemy because of a social media post. It was resolved, but it reminded them how serious it could have been.



| WWL Year | Christians killed | Christians physically or mentally abused | Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed | Christians forced to marry |
|----------|-------------------|--|--|----------------------------|
| 2026 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 2 |
| 2025 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period – for full results see the violence section of the country's corresponding WWL Persecution Dynamics. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*.*

PRIVATE LIFE

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

FAMILY LIFE

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

COMMUNITY LIFE

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

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

NATIONAL LIFE

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

CHURCH LIFE

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



International obligations & rights violated

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

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

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

- Christian parents cannot raise their children according to their religious values (CRC Art. 14);
- Christian female converts run the risk of being forcibly married to Muslim men or losing custody of their children (CEDAW Art. 16)

Situation of other religious minorities

Non-Sunni Muslim groups such as Shiites and Ahmadis are banned and persecuted, and atheism is prohibited. Activities of Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Chinese residents are restricted, including bans on cultural expressions like the dragon dance. The Iban animist community is especially targeted for Islamic outreach. The government permits minority faiths to worship but monitors services closely and bans groups it considers “deviant,” including Ahmadiyya, Baha’i, and Jehovah’s Witnesses ([IRFR, 2023](#)).



Open Doors in Brunei

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



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- All 50 Country Dossiers – along with the latest update of WWL Methodology – can be accessed [here](#).
- The WWL 2026 reporting period was 01 October 2024 - 30 September 2025.

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.