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## Brunei: Full Country Dossier

January 2024



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2024

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

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

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## Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

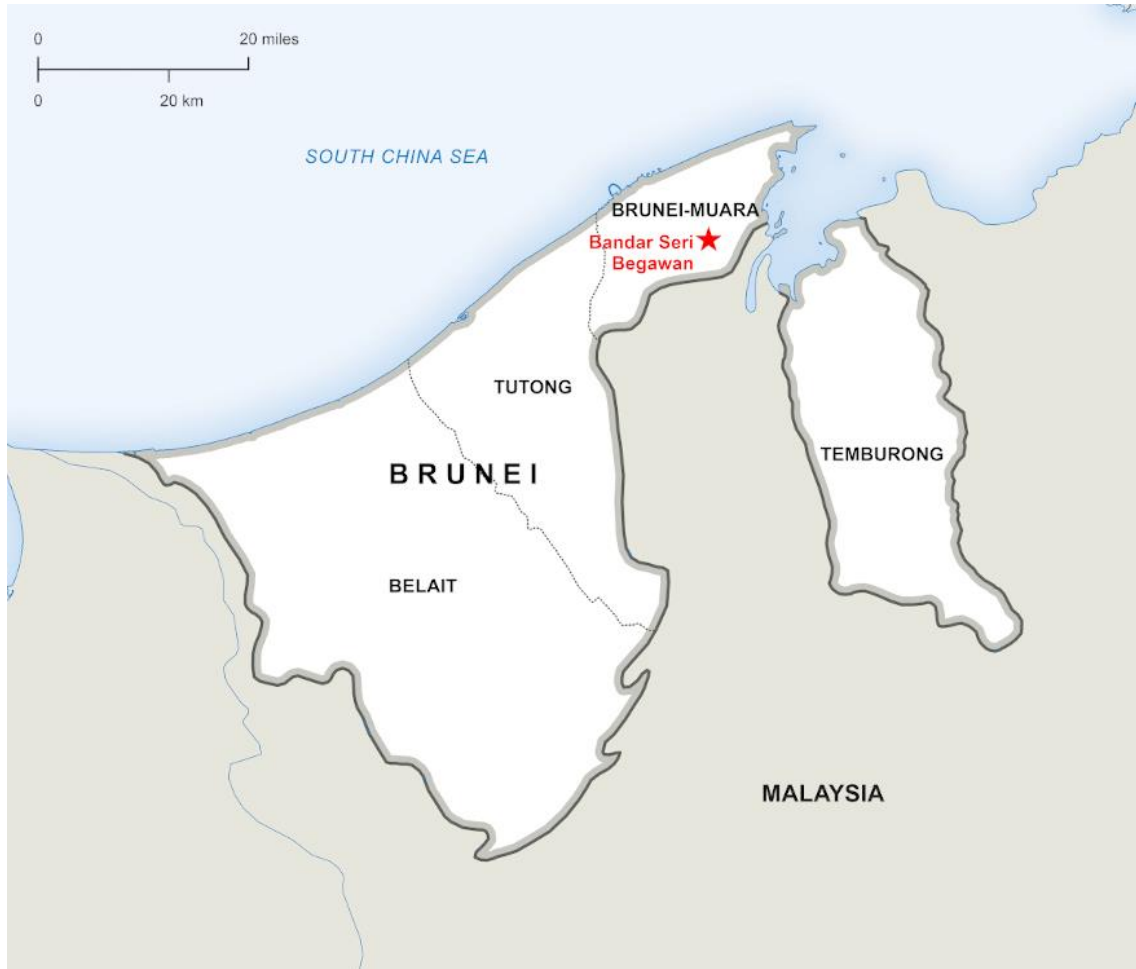
# WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Brunei

## Brief country details

Brunei: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
449,000	54,200	12.1

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

## Map of country



Brunei: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	66	44
WWL 2023	65	46
WWL 2022	64	46
WWL 2021	64	39
WWL 2020	63	37

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Brunei: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Islamic oppression	Government officials, One's own (extended) family, Non-Christian religious leaders, Ethnic group leaders
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Non-Christian religious leaders, Ethnic group leaders

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

## Brief description of the persecution situation

Converts from Islam face considerable levels of pressure as conversion is punishable according to penal law and everything will be done to bring converts back to their original faith. Non-traditional Christian communities cannot be registered as churches, but have to be registered as companies, societies or family centers. As such, they are treated as secular organizations and are required to submit their financial and operational reports to the government every year. The whole of society (Christians included) is affected by the continuing introduction of Sharia laws as well as by the tightening economic situation. In comparison to most of its southeast Asian peers, Brunei managed the COVID-19 crisis well. It opened up to business travelers and tourists again, but has been struggling to diversify its economy. Due to the economic situation and continuous pressure, many young Christians are leaving to pursue opportunities abroad.

## Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Brunei has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in 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:

- Brunei citizens are barred from leaving Islam by law and therefore deprived of their right to have or adopt a religion or belief of their choice (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian parents face difficulties to 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)

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

- By decree, the importing of Bibles and any public celebration of Christmas continue to be banned.
- Christian pastors and workers are facing a multitude of restrictions, including monitoring. Both native and foreign Christians have been targets of aggressive Islamization.

## Specific examples of positive developments

None

## External Links - Situation in brief

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

# WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Brunei

## Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 covering 154 countries, Brunei not included	AI report 2022/23	<a href="https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/">https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/</a>	12 July 2023
BBC News Brunei profile - updated 24 February 2023	BBC Brunei profile	<a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-12990058">https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-12990058</a>	12 July 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index country report 2022 – covering 137 countries, Brunei not included	BTI report 2022	<a href="https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/">https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/</a>	12 July 2023
CIA World Factbook Brunei - updated 30 June 2023	World Factbook Brunei	<a href="https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/brunei/">https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/brunei/</a>	12 July 2023
Crisis24 Brunei report (Garda World)	Crisis24 Brunei report	<a href="https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/brunei-darussalam">https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/brunei-darussalam</a>	12 July 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit Brunei profile 2023	EIU Brunei profile 2023	<a href="https://country.eiu.com/brunei">https://country.eiu.com/brunei</a>	12 July 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 Brunei	<a href="https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/">https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/</a>	12 July 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Brunei not included	Democracy Index 2023	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores</a>	12 July 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 Brunei	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/brunei/freedom-world/2023">https://freedomhouse.org/country/brunei/freedom-world/2023</a>	12 July 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries, Brunei not included	Freedom on the Net 2023	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores</a>	
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 Brunei profile	<a href="https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/brunei-darussalam/">https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/brunei-darussalam/</a>	12 July 2023
Girls Not Brides Brunei report	Girls Not Brides Brunei	<a href="https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/brunei/">https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/brunei/</a>	12 July 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023, Brunei not included	HRW 2023 World Report	<a href="https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023">https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023</a>	
Internet World Stats available in 2023	IWS 2023 Brunei	<a href="https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#bn">https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#bn</a>	12 July 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 Brunei	<a href="https://rsf.org/en/brunei">https://rsf.org/en/brunei</a>	12 July 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index covering 180 countries, Brunei not included	CPI 2022	<a href="https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/brunei">https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/brunei</a>	12 July 2023
UNDP: Human Development Report Brunei - data updates as of 8 September 2022	UNDP HDR Brunei	<a href="https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/BRN">https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/BRN</a>	12 July 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Brunei	IRFR 2022 Brunei	<a href="https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/brunei/">https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/brunei/</a>	12 July 2023
USCIRF 2023 covering 17 CPC / 11 SWL, Brunei not included	USCIRF 2023	<a href="https://www.uscifr.gov/countries">https://www.uscifr.gov/countries</a>	
World Bank Brunei data – 2021	World Bank Brunei data	<a href="https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=BRN">https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=BRN</a>	12 July 2023

## Recent history

Brunei was a British protectorate from 1888 to 1984 and is now the only politically independent sultanate in the world. The ruling sultan is the 29th, the royal line reaching back as far as 1363. On 1 January 1984, the day of independence, the ruling sultan officially proclaimed Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) as Brunei's national philosophy. MIB is a blend of Malay and Islamic cultural values guarded by the monarchy. This system opposes the concept of secularism. May 2014 saw the introduction of Sharia Penal Code (SPC); however, implementation was not announced until 2018 with the [introduction](#) of its Criminal Procedures Code (CPC) (Borneo Bulletin, 31 March 2019). While Brunei normally does not come into the international spotlight, the fact that it assumed the annually rotating ASEAN presidency in 2021 pushed it into the limelight, as did the escalating crisis in Myanmar at the same time (see below: *Political and legal landscape*). After this brief period, the country enjoyed its relative anonymity again.



## Political and legal landscape

The sultan rules as [absolute monarch](#), being chief of state, but also concurrently prime minister, finance minister, minister of the interior as well as of defense and head of religion (East Asia Forum, 23 October 2019). Hence, all power is concentrated in his hands. The general public deeply respects the sultan and there is no demand for more political participation.

In a major [cabinet reshuffle](#) in June 2022, the sultan replaced eight ministers. While his own ministerial duties remained unchanged, the change is noteworthy because for the first time since 1958 a woman has been made full member of the cabinet, in this case as the Minister of Education (The Scoop, 7 June 2022). There have been deputy and vice positions taken by women before, but not a position as minister.

The sultan introduced obligatory Islamic religious studies for all schools. But more importantly, he announced the successive introduction of Sharia in criminal law, the so-called “Hudud” law, in October 2013. In 2014, Brunei enacted the new Sharia Penal Code (SPC), which is to apply also to non-Muslims, and which includes offences carrying the death penalty. The 2nd phase was supposed to be implemented in 2015 but was delayed. In March 2018, the implementation of the second phase was finally announced.

In a surprising move only made public on 25 March 2019, Brunei’s Minister of Religion declared 3 April 2019 as the commencement date for the [implementation of Sharia Penal Code](#). The Government Gazette was dated 29 December 2018, but the announcement was only made public ten days before implementation. After a five year period of leaving this law pending, the sudden publication of an imminent date for implementation seemed to have been an attempt by the sultan and his government to avoid as much international outcry and pressure as possible. Judging by the public outcry afterwards, these efforts did not succeed. International media was quick to highlight the immediate [serious consequences](#) for the LGBTQIA+ community in the country, but it would have consequences for converts from Islam to Christianity as well (Reuters, 25 March 2019). In a rare move, the sultan did react publicly to criticism by announcing that his country did not intend to [implement the death penalty](#) as foreseen in Brunei’s SPC (Reuters, 5 May 2019). So far, no cases against religious minorities (or LGBTQIA+ groups) have been reported.

Brunei took over the rotating presidency of the ASEAN group of southeast Asian states for 2021. When the crisis in Myanmar emerged with the military coup on 1 February 2021, Brunei thus found itself in an unwanted spotlight it is not used to. In a highly exceptional move, ASEAN organized an emergency meeting in Jakarta in April and came up with a five-point-plan (for more detail, see the Full Country Dossier on Myanmar). Then in June 2021, Bruneian officials representing ASEAN went on what one observer called a [‘disastrous mission’](#) (Jakarta Post, 10 June 2021). The ASEAN envoys publicly used the titles General Min Aung Hlaing had given himself, thus apparently endorsing his leadership and the coup. A press release along these lines was hastily taken off the ASEAN website. While this might be viewed as just a 'diplomatic accident', it is an illustration of how politics is understood in Brunei and seems to reveal a thinking pattern which can be identified with the 'Dictatorial paranoia' to be found in Brunei.

## Gender perspective

The new [Penal Code](#) was also greeted by concerns about gender equality; while the sentence applies to both women and men, women are reportedly disproportionately affected by punishment for crimes involving sexual relations and are thereby more vulnerable to discriminatory investigations ([CEDAW, 2014](#)). On a broader level, Brunei's political and legal landscape lacks gender equality in relation to marriage, divorce, child guardianship and inheritance laws. Whilst Brunei ratified the CEDAW convention, it made a general reservation to any aspects of the Convention which might be deemed contrary to the beliefs and principles of Islam ([CEDAW, 2014](#)). Notable issues of concern include child marriage and domestic violence. Although official data on child marriage is lacking, it is reportedly rare and an interdicted social practice ([USDS Human Rights Report, 2022, p.18-19](#)). Insufficient laws addressing domestic violence make it difficult for victims to escape abusive marriages.

## Religious landscape

Brunei: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	54,200	12.1
Muslim	259,000	57.7
Hindu	4,200	0.9
Buddhist	45,700	10.2
Ethno-religionist	45,300	10.1
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	360	0.1
Atheist	130	0.0
Agnostic	5,300	1.2
Other	35,530	7.9
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

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

Muslims (mostly Sunni) make up 57.7% of the population. The ruling sultan is head of religion: What he wants, becomes law - and if he decides that Islam will continue on a more conservative path, everyone (including the churches) have to accept that. Christians are free to worship, but they have been warned not to do so "excessively and openly". The Sharia Penal Code includes several provisions which limit the freedom of religion, not just for converts, but for the Christian minority as well. Time will tell how the provisions are implemented. Some of them are mentioned in more detail below (see: *Pressure in the 5 Spheres of life*).

The US State Department explains the ethno-religious affiliations as follows (IRFR 2022 Brunei, p 3):

- "There is significant variation in religious identification among ethnic groups. According to 2021 official statistics (the most recent), ethnic Malay citizens comprise 65.7 percent of the population and are defined by law as Muslims from birth. The ethnic Chinese population, which is approximately 9.4 percent of the population and includes both citizens and stateless permanent residents, is 65 percent Buddhist and 20 percent Christian. Indigenous tribes, such as the Dusun, Bisaya, Murut, and Iban, make up approximately 4 percent of the population and are estimated to be 50 percent Muslim, 15 percent Christian, and the remainder followers of other religious groups, including adherents of traditional spiritual practices. The remaining 18 percent of the population includes foreign-born workers, primarily from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and other South Asian countries. According to official statistics, approximately half of these temporary and permanent residents are Muslim, more than one-quarter are Christian, and 15 percent are Buddhist."

## Economic landscape

According to UNDP HDR Brunei:

- **Gross National Income (2017 USD PPP):** 63.965
- **Rate of multidimensional poverty:** No data available
- **Remittances:** No data available

According to World Bank Brunei data:

- Brunei is classified as being a high income economy.
- **GDP per capita (PPP constant 2017 international USD):** 58.670
- **GDP per capita growth rate:** -1.6% (as in 2022)
- **Poverty gap at 5.50 USD a day (2011 PPP):** No data available

The COVID-19 crisis left a tangible impact on Brunei's life and economy, but it weathered the storm [better than many other](#) countries (The Diplomat, 22 June 2020), although in August 2021, Brunei saw a spike in COVID infections. The growth rate continues to contract, although a stronger demand for oil saved Brunei from suffering such a severe effect on the GDP as experienced by almost all of its Asian peers. The strong dependency on the oil industry could be seen in the numbers, with the rise in petrochemical production reaching [almost 600%](#) in the first half of 2020 (The Scoop, 3 January 2021). At the same time, the dependency on producing oil also means that Brunei is missing out on the post-pandemic recovery which most of its Southeast Asian peers are enjoying; this can be seen in the continued contraction of GDP.

Although Brunei itself reported a miniscule growth of 0.8% for the first quarter of 2023 ([RPT\\_Q12023.pdf at mofe.gov.bn](#)), the IMF projection for the whole year is -0.8% ([Brunei Darussalam and the IMF, 11 September 2023](#)). The fact that the decommissioning of ageing oil wells is predicted to become a lucrative business over the next years (when [around 1000 wells](#) need to be closed over a period of 30 years) shows that the dependency on oil may come to an end (The Scoop, 28 June 2021). Christians are not excluded from these general trends.

The dependency on oil is one reason why Brunei is trying to diversify its economy in order to give more of its citizens a good future perspective, especially the younger generation. Although the development plan "Vision Brunei 2035" aiming to expand various economic sectors was already published in 2007, there is little to show for it so far. The first quarter of 2022 saw a [growing oil output](#) due to a recently discovered oil field and to the high energy prizes caused by the Russian/Ukraine war (The Scoop, 2 March 2022). With an estimated [70-80% of the country's citizens](#) employed by the government or government-linked institutions (The Diplomat, 17 February 2016), there is limited hope for an internally-driven economic expansion. This is the main reason why the younger generation is increasingly looking for employment opportunities abroad.

The government of Brunei needs to make some difficult choices. The comfortable days, when the ruling sultan was able to care for all his subjects' needs, will soon be over, even though oil prices are surging at the moment. Until now, his government provides free medical services and subsidizes goods such as rice and housing. There are no school fees for state schools, and citizens of Brunei do not have to pay income tax. But since the oil and gas reserves may only last for just one more generation or less, the government needs to start thinking about alternatives. Until now, it has [not been particularly successful](#) as it seems that the world does not need an "Islamic Singapore" (or already has one in United Arab Emirates' Dubai or Qatar's Doha) (Asia Times, 26 April 2017). However, some "downstream projects", related to the oil industry, seem to be successful in the country's efforts at diversification, like a [urea production](#) facility (World Fertilizer Magazine, 1 February 2022).

Other projects, such as the the Brunei Muara port (EIU Brunei profile 2023) and the expansion of the [Hengyi petrochemicals plant](#) (The Scoop, 8 March 2023) are on track, but are mostly related to the petrochemical industry as well. The extensive Hengyi plant expansion, in particular, comes with its own [challenges](#), including a growing dependency on China; it is a state-led and state-driven project allowing for little meaningful diversification of the economy (East Asia Forum, 31 August 2023). Evidence for Brunei's apparent leaning towards China can also be seen in the fact that a virtually unknown Bruneian airline placed the first [international order](#) for 30 China-made C 919 aircraft, although the company structures are opaque (Reuters, 22 September 2023).

### Gender perspective

In general, women are more economically vulnerable than men due to patrilineal inheritance practices, and a lower female labor force participation rate; 55.5% of women are in the workforce as of 2022, compared to 72.3% of men ([World Bank, Gender Data Portal, 2023](#)). This economic dependence could be exploited to put pressure on female converts.

## Social and cultural landscape

According to UNDP HDR Brunei and World Factbook Brunei:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Malay 67.4%, Chinese 9.6%, other 23% (2021 est.)
- **Main languages:** Malay (Bahasa Melayu) (official), English, Chinese dialects
- **Urbanization rate:** 79.1%
- **Literacy rate:** 97.6% (15 years and above)

- **Mean years of schooling:** 9.1 years
- **Health and education indicators:** Per 10,000 people, Brunei has 16.1 physicians and 29 hospital beds. The pupil teacher ratio in elementary school is 10:1

According to World Bank Brunei data:

- **Population/Age distribution:** 22% of the population are below the age of 14, 6.2% are above the age of 65.
- **Education:** The primary school enrolment rate is 98%, the primary school completion rate is 105% (2020)
- **Unemployment:** 7.2%; the rate of vulnerable employment is 6.5% (modeled ILO estimate).
- **IDPs/Refugees:** There is no international data on migration to Brunei available, however, an estimated 26% of residents in Brunei are immigrants.

According to UNDP HDR Brunei:

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a score of 0.838, Brunei ranks 47th on the list of 189 countries. Brunei's HDI has levelled off at a very high level
- **Life expectancy:** 75.9 years
- **Median age:** 32.3
- **Gini coefficient:** data is not available
- **Gender inequality:** With a score of 0.255, Brunei ranks 60th of 162 countries in the Gender Inequality Index.
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 9.1% and 6% of the population are in vulnerable employment. The rate of unemployed youth is 30%, the rate of youth neither in school nor employment is 21% (between 15 and 24 years of age)

The population of Brunei is ethnically homogenous but, like neighboring Malaysia, it also has a sizeable Chinese and a smaller Indian community. Restrictions are gradually being imposed on the whole population. For instance, during Ramadan all restaurants (including non-Muslim establishments) must close. Also, all restaurants (including inside hotels) must close every Friday from 12 noon to 2pm during Friday prayers. Public Christmas celebrations are [banned](#) (UCA News, 23 December 2019).

Citizens of Brunei are used to a high level of social benefits provided by the government, meaning the sultan. It may prove difficult to remove some of these benefits, at a time when the economy is not thriving anymore. At the same time, the government is trying to reduce the unhealthy large number of citizens employed in government departments. The official overall unemployment rate is decreasing, but youth unemployment is consistently more than double that rate, explaining at least in part why many of the younger generation are planning to leave the country or have already left. This is also an incentive for Christian youth to leave, in addition to the pressure experienced by belonging to a religious minority. Due to the difficult situation and uncertain future, [mental health issues](#) are a frequent problem; according to official numbers, 1.5% of the population are in treatment for mental health disorders (The Diplomat, 29 June 2021).

The situation of migrant workers may come under closer scrutiny, if the economic situation does not improve. For example, there are 20,000 migrant workers from Bangladesh in Brunei and in a normal year, around 5,000 would be hired annually. However, from January 2020 to August 2022, a mere 950 workers were [hired](#) (The Diplomat, 19 October 2022). Although this was mainly due to the pandemic, it remains to be seen if the numbers will be normalizing again.

### Gender perspective

Within Brunei, gender stereotypes remain deeply entrenched and men and women are expected to assume traditional gender roles, but that is rapidly changing ([Curaming and Alkaff, 2021, p. 9](#)). For instance, a recent cabinet reshuffle by Brunei's monarch saw the emergence of the first woman to assume a ministerial position since 1959 ([The Scoop, 7 June 2022](#)). The CEDAW committee observed that Brunei's socio-normative attitudes "are reflected in women's academic and professional choices, their limited participation in political and public life and their unequal position in the labor market and in marriage and family relations' and serve to 'perpetuate women's subordination within the family and society" ([CEDAW, 2014](#)). Domestic violence victims rarely report cases due to stigma, shame, economic dependence, fear of reprisals and fear of losing access to their children. On a societal level, it is considered a private matter that should be dealt with by the family or local community.

### Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2023 Brunei):

- **Internet usage:** 119.7% penetration – survey date: July 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 73.8% penetration – survey date: July 2022

According to [Napoleon Cat \(May 2023\)](#), 50.8% of Facebook users are male compared to 49.2% of women, reflecting a slight gender gap in relation to social media usage.

According to World Bank Brunei data:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 136 per 100 people

Brunei's Internet penetration rate is high, reflecting a modern and highly developed country. Accordingly, the mobile phone subscription rate is also high. Apart from a high rate of Facebook users, Brunei is the country with the second highest rate of [Instagram users](#) relative to its population (Borneo Bulletin, 30 January 2021). Media is limited and it is unthinkable to openly criticize the government or the sultan. Nonetheless, the younger generation in particular is very active on social media sites like Reddit, which has been one of the first places where Bruneians have started to ask questions about the deliberately low-key introduction of the Sharia Penal Code (SPC). For example: A discussion started in [July 2020](#) on Reddit about whether citizens can read religious books and have religious discussions in public. For Christians, these online forums are an opportunity to participate in debates and to cautiously and wisely share views, as long as such participation is not perceived as being openly missionary in nature. To what extent these discussions feed back into the 'real world' is an entirely different question, of course.

## Security situation

There are currently no Islamic militant groups active in Brunei and - in contrast to neighboring Southeast Asian states - no Bruneian Muslims appear to have joined the Islamic State group to fight in countries like Syria and Iraq. However, Islam is becoming increasingly conservative, limiting the space for non-Muslim Bruneian citizens. Therefore, the lack of militant groups does not mean Christians are not under pressure.

Social cohesion is high and the potential for unrest is very limited. In Southeast Asia, Brunei may be one of the safest countries to live in. Christians (whether expatriates or citizens) are able to live unaffected by violence as long as they abide by the written and unwritten rules.

## Trends analysis

### 1) Churches are facing continued restrictions

Out of fear that Muslims could be led astray, public Christmas celebrations have been banned since 2015 in the whole of Brunei, with the exception of church buildings. The ban includes the use of religious symbols such as crosses, lighting candles, putting up Christmas trees, singing religious songs in public and sending Christmas greetings. Punishment for violation is potentially a five-year prison sentence. Such limitations as this make it clear to churches that especially the younger generation needs to grow up with a strong Christian faith. A particular challenge for churches is that young people are increasingly leaving the country to seek better opportunities abroad (see also below: *Trend #3*).

### 2) The leadership is drawing its inspiration from Islam, but not in a radical way

Brunei displays a penchant for "Dictatorial paranoia" which became visible to the outside world in its dealing with the Myanmar crisis, when it interpreted the ASEAN non-interference rule in a very strict way, even recognizing the military take-over (in the role of ASEAN presidency, as explained above in Political and legal landscape). However, it seems to be increasingly the question of where exactly the leadership draws its inspiration from. Apart from a certain reliance on China - although Brunei is generally trying to [keep a balance](#) between the USA (or the broader "West") and China (USIP, 26 October 2023) -, both the sultan and the government are trying to push the people towards a deeper connection with the origins of Islam. In this respect, it is noteworthy that the state TV station announced the airing of its first drama series in the [Arab language](#), co-produced by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Borneo Bulletin, 1 May 2021). Citizens are also frequently reminded of the necessity of adhering to Islamic values as expressed by MIB. At the same time, the appointment of the first female minister in a Bruneian cabinet since 1958 may point to developing an understanding of Islam similar to that in neighboring Malaysia.

### 3) Young Christians are leaving the country in large numbers

In the future, Christians will be facing a changing church situation, since young Christians are leaving the country in large numbers. Uncertainty about the Sharia Penal Code (SPC) affects the whole country, but religious minorities in particular, although initial fears may have eased as so far no SPC cases have been reported since its introduction in 2019. An encouraging sign is that

young people are using online forums more freely to discuss even delicate questions; however, as long as this does not translate into more freedom to do so 'offline' as well, young people have little incentive to stay.

## External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: introduction - <https://borneobulletin.com.bn/2019/03/syariah-penal-code-order-2013-to-be-enforced-on-april-3/>
- Political and legal landscape: absolute monarch - <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/10/23/the-state-of-islam-in-brunei/>
- Political and legal landscape: cabinet reshuffle - <https://thescoop.co/2022/06/07/hm-new-cabinet-must-carry-out-duties-with-full-loyalty-and-responsibility/>
- Political and legal landscape: implementation of Sharia Penal Code - [http://www.agc.gov.bn/AGC%20Images/LAWS/Gazette\\_PDF/2018/S068.pdf](http://www.agc.gov.bn/AGC%20Images/LAWS/Gazette_PDF/2018/S068.pdf)
- Political and legal landscape: serious consequences - <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brunei-lgbt-laws/brunei-urged-to-halt-introduction-of-strict-new-anti-lgbt-laws-idUSKCN1R61M9>
- Political and legal landscape: implement the death penalty - <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brunei-lgbt-sultan/brunei-says-it-wont-enforce-gay-death-penalty-after-backlash-idUSKCN1SB0FS>
- Political and legal landscape: disastrous mission - <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2021/06/09/bruneis-disastrous-mission.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Penal Code - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/05/22/bruneis-pernicious-new-penal-code>
- Political and legal landscape: CEDAW, 2014 - [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/BRN/CO/1-2&Lang=En](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/BRN/CO/1-2&Lang=En)
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- Political and legal landscape: USDS Human Rights Report, 2022, p.18-19 - [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/415610\\_BRUNEI-2022-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/415610_BRUNEI-2022-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf)
- Economic landscape: better than many other - <https://thedi diplomat.com/2020/06/how-brunei-beat-covid-19/>
- Economic landscape: almost 600% - <https://thescoop.co/2021/01/03/ambd-petrochemical-activities-biggest-driver-of-economic-growth-in-first-half-of-2020/>
- Economic landscape: RPT\_Q12023.pdf at mofe.gov.bn - [https://deps.mofe.gov.bn/DEPD%20Documents%20Library/DOS/GDP/2023/RPT\\_Q12023.pdf](https://deps.mofe.gov.bn/DEPD%20Documents%20Library/DOS/GDP/2023/RPT_Q12023.pdf)
- Economic landscape: Brunei Darussalam and the IMF, 11 September 2023 - <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/BRN>
- Economic landscape: around 1000 wells - <https://thescoop.co/2021/06/28/over-1000-ageing-oil-wells-to-close-in-next-30-years/>
- Economic landscape: growing oil output - <https://thescoop.co/2022/03/02/brunei-to-ramp-up-hydrocarbon-output-after-new-oil-discovery/>
- Economic landscape: 70-80% of the country's citizens - <https://thedi diplomat.com/2016/02/bruneis-economy-running-on-empty/>
- Economic landscape: not been particularly successful - <https://asiatimes.com/2017/04/wells-run-dry-brunei/>
- Economic landscape: urea production - <https://www.worldfertilizer.com/nitrogen/01022022/new-brunei-urea-melt-plant-begins-production/>
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- Economic landscape: World Bank, Gender Data Portal, 2023 - <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/countries/brunei-darussalam>



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- Technological landscape: Napoleon Cat (May 2023), - <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-brunei-darussalam/2023/05/>
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- Technological landscape: July 2020 - [https://www.reddit.com/r/Brunei/comments/hmyguf/legally\\_can\\_you\\_read\\_religious\\_books\\_and\\_have/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Brunei/comments/hmyguf/legally_can_you_read_religious_books_and_have/)
- Trends analysis: keep a balance - <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/10/why-brunei-hedging-between-us-and-china>
- Trends analysis: Arab language - <https://borneobulletin.com.bn/new-drama-series-inculcate-love-arabic-language/>

## WWL 2024: Church information / Brunei

### Christian origins

Random missionary activities by Portuguese traders in the 16th century largely failed and it was as late as 1846 that the "Borneo Church Mission" was founded and an Anglican church congregation established. The Roman Catholic Church has been present in the country for more than a century; independent Protestant churches came later, when migrant workers entered the country. Most of these churches are linked to organizations and churches in their countries of origin.

### Church spectrum today

Brunei: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	20,000	36.9
Protestant	13,700	25.3
Independent	19,100	35.2
Unaffiliated	1,500	2.8
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
<b>Total</b> <small>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</small>	<b>54,300</b>	<b>100.2</b>
Evangelical movement	11,200	20.7
Renewalist movement	17,200	31.7

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

**Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

Apart from the Roman Catholic and Anglican church, there are a few Protestant churches in Brunei, which also serve expatriate communities (for instance, South Koreans and Indians). Brunei also has small Methodist and Seventh Day Adventist congregations, as well as those from the Borneo Evangelical Church.

## Areas where Christians face most difficulties

The country is geographically small and has no particular hotspots of persecution.

## Christian communities and how they are affected

**Communities of expatriate Christians:** Expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation. This category is therefore not scored in WWL analysis.

**Historical Christian communities:** These communities, such as the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church, are increasingly facing hostility and have to exercise more and more caution since they are strictly monitored. Nevertheless, they are still less affected by persecution than the newer Protestant groups and convert communities.

**Converts to Christianity:** Converts from a Muslim background face strong pressure from family and friends as conversion is considered illegal. Should their conversion become known, both family and the authorities would do their best to bring them back to their original faith.

**Non-traditional Christian communities:** Evangelical and Pentecostal churches know that they and their meetings (both in their private and church life) are being closely watched by the authorities and surrounding community and are forced to live their Christian life in such a way as not to draw unwanted attention. They may also meet under the roof of an historical Christian community such as an Anglican church.

# WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Brunei

## Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

## Position on the World Watch List

Brunei: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	66	44
WWL 2023	65	46
WWL 2022	64	46
WWL 2021	64	39
WWL 2020	63	37

The score in WWL 2024 increased by 0.7 points, reflecting a more or less stable, but difficult situation for Christians in the country. The implementation of Sharia Penal Law has not affected the score yet and it remains to be seen what it will mean for Christians, apart from increased insecurity and fear. Pressure in the *Church sphere of life* increased the most, as restrictions on working among youth have become more strongly felt, especially when such ministry can be understood as proselytization. The average pressure is very high and virtually unchanged in WWL 2024. However, the score for violence tripled, although from a very low level to 1.3 points. Controlling, watching and spying upon Christians remains more important for the authorities than exerting force.

## Persecution engines

Brunei: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Not at all
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	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

*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.*

### **Islamic oppression (Very strong), blended with Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong)**

Brunei is an Islamic nation, based on an ideology called “Malay Islamic Monarchy” or MIB (Melayu Islam Beraja). This form of government is claimed to be the fairest for all people in the country, whether they are Muslims or not. The sultan has favored Brunei government democratization (although Brunei is still far from becoming a real democracy) and declared himself prime minister and president.

Brunei wants to be a center of Islamic excellence: Sharia law was fully implemented in civil and religious affairs for all Muslims even before the country’s independence in 1984 and the government follows a plan of Islamization among the partly Christian, partly animist tribal people in supporting the so-called *dawah* movement (Islamic evangelism). As US State Department IRFR 2022 (p.15) states:

"The government continued to offer incentives, including help with housing and welfare assistance, to prospective converts to Islam and the Shafi’i school, especially those from indigenous communities in rural areas. The government gave presentations on the benefits of converting to Islam that received extensive press coverage in state-influenced media. In December, MORA reported 400 individuals had converted to Islam from January to November a slight decrease from the previous year. Converts included citizens and permanent residents, as well as foreigners. Government policy supported Islam through the national MIB philosophy as well as through government pledges to make the country a *zikir* nation (one that remembers and obeys Allah)"

The sultans have held absolute power in the country for over 600 years. All important governmental positions are held by the ruling sultan; since citizens value him so highly, he has not been blamed for any economic challenges. As a country expert stated: "Apart from all the other titles and roles, the Sultan is also the official ‘guardian and protector’ of Islam and tradition in Brunei." Therefore, the emphasis on and the implementation of a stricter form of Islam are also about his lasting legacy to society, given that he is now 77 years old. The sultan can declare a State of Emergency, should he feel threatened by any party or religious group. His rule has not implied any danger to Christians so far, but his Islamic conservatism was shown in 2016 when he criticized the authorities for their failure to implement the second phase of Sharia law (SPC - the criminal rules) which was delayed until 2019. Therefore, conservative Islam serves both as state ideology backed by the ruler and as a means to control the population, leaving Christians as second-class citizens at best and insecure about their future.

## Drivers of persecution

Brunei: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG							VERY STRONG	
Government officials	Very strong							Very strong	
Ethnic group leaders	Medium							Medium	
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong							Strong	
One's own (extended) family	Very strong							-	

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

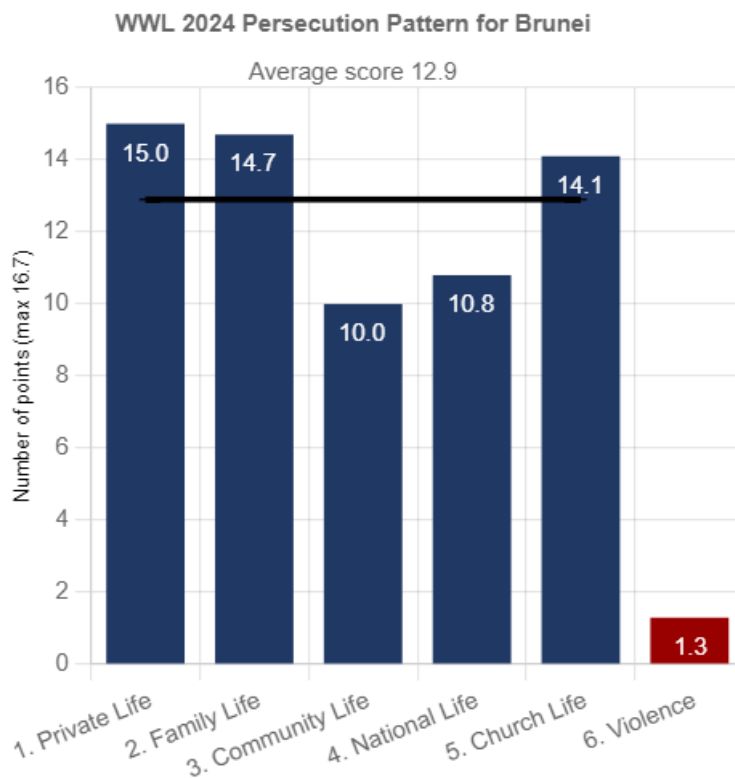
### Drivers of Islamic oppression

- **Extended family (Very strong):** Conversion is dishonoring to the family. As the family is usually the first to discover a convert, there will be great pressure on him or her to return to the family faith, also to avoid punishment from the government. Family members and neighbors can easily create trouble for converts to Christianity and churches by simply reporting them to the security department KDN, which is frequently happening.
- **Government officials (Very strong):** Since all MIB policies (which favor Muslims over other religions) are legally enforced by the government authorities in all sectors of the country, government officials are major drivers of persecution. Following the introduction of SPC, the Royal Brunei Police Force (RBPF) and Religious Enforcement Division officers under the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) cooperate on investigations of crimes covered by both secular law and sharia. MIB is a compulsory subject for students in both public and private schools, and at university level.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** Islamic religious leaders have been sources of indirect pressure for Christians through the process of Islamization. There is much *dawah* (Islamic mission) being carried out by these leaders and their efforts have been partly successful, which causes rifts in Christian families. For carrying out *dawah*, Islamic authorities organize a range of proselytizing activities and offer financial incentives to propagate Islam. These efforts have reportedly increased in recent months. Both non-Muslims and Muslims alike face social pressure to conform to Islamic guidelines regarding behavior.
- **Ethnic group leaders (Medium):** The "M" in MIB stands for "Malay", so ethnic group leaders continue to emphasize the privileged position Malays hold in Brunei. Islamic missionary work targets ethnic minority groups living in Brunei.

### Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- **Government officials and non-Christian religious leaders (Very strong/Strong):** The government describes its official national philosophy as Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB), or Malay Islamic Monarchy, which the government defines as “a system that encompasses strong Malay cultural influences, stressing the importance of Islam in daily life and governance, and respect for the monarchy as represented by His Majesty the Sultan.” A government body, the MIB Supreme Council, seeks to spread and strengthen the MIB philosophy and ensure MIB is enshrined in the nation’s laws and policies. Religious (i.e. Islamic) and Malay leaders exercise great influence on the sultan (who is considered the protector and defender of the Malay race and Islam) and thereby put pressure on the Christian minority too.
- **Ethnic group leaders (Medium):** As ethnic group leaders have a high interest to keep the government in power and secure the dominant position of the Malay people, they will go to great lengths to support the ruler and put pressure on minorities, including Christians, if necessary.

### The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for Brunei shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Brunei remained at a very high level, just below 13.0 points.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Private, Family and Church spheres of life* (where pressure is at extreme levels). Pressure on *Church life* increased the most, since restrictions on working among youth have caused serious difficulties, especially where this could be viewed as

being proselytization. Pressure on converts is especially acute in the *Private* and *Family spheres*, while all Christians experience pressure in the *National* and *Church spheres*. This pressure is fueled by the implementation of Sharia law; the legal prerequisites for full implementation are now given, although there have been no cases reported of Sharia law being implemented against Christians.

- The score for violence against Christians remained at a very low level, although it tripled. Persecution of Christians has never been particularly violent in Brunei.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

*In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2024 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the "WWL Scoring example" in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://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.). (4.00 points)**

All media in Brunei is monitored and censored, when the authorities see the need. It is therefore very risky for Christians to actively talk about their faith on social media using their real name, although some pastors continue to do so. Even under a pseudonym, most would still be very cautious, as they could easily be accused of "propagating a religion other than Islam" (Section 209 SPC), "Persuading Muslim to change religion" (Section 210 SPC) or "Persuading a person who has no religion to become a believer of non-Islamic faith" (Section 211 SPC). For converts, writing about Christian faith is out of the question and would bring serious danger.

**Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (4.00 points)**

Any private statement about Christianity can be construed as proselytizing for the Christian faith, so even the wearing of a cross is done with much more caution than in previous years. It is also usual not to show any Christian affiliation through stickers, crucifixes etc. in a car. As a country expert explained: "In general, the Christian community will avoid displaying Christian images or symbols to keep the peace within the community." Anything related to Christmas (whether Christian or not, even a Santa Claus hat) is also banned in public places in Brunei.

**Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (4.00 points)**

It is dangerous for Christian converts to discuss their faith with immediate and extended family or anyone else. As Bruneian laws do not allow Malay Muslims to leave Islam and strict punishments are imposed on those who do so, every conversation about Christian faith can be construed as proselytizing and thus against Sharia law. Section 112(1) of the Sharia Penal Code of Brunei stipulates that a Muslim who turns away from Islam is to be punished with death, or with imprisonment for a term not exceeding thirty years and receive corporal punishment, depending on the type of evidence. If a Sharia court is satisfied that the accused has repented,

the court must order an acquittal. So far, the punishments do not seem to have been implemented. Nevertheless, Christians need to be very cautious about whom they talk with and what about. Spreading Christian "propaganda" to followers of other faiths or to members of the tribal groups, who are often adherents of ethnic religions, is prohibited and carries a penalty of up to five years in prison and a fine of up to 20,000 Brunei dollars. Christians, especially church leaders, are under permanent surveillance by the authorities. Consequently, Christians tend to refrain from talking openly about their faith in case they get themselves into trouble.

**Block 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (3.50 points)**

It is very risky for a convert from Islam to own any Christian materials as it could expose their Christian identity. The SPC includes a list of words and expressions, including the word "Allah," reserved for use by Muslims only or in relation to Islam. One exception to this is the Bahasa Indonesia translation of the Bible, which is very common in the region and used by many Christians. However, the Bible version preferred by native/Bahasa Melayu speaking Christians is the Bahasa Malay Bible. This is not easily obtained and is risky for a convert to own one. Non-convert Christians are free to read their Bibles and conduct prayers privately unhindered. The US State Department IRFR 2022 states (p.13): "The government continued to enforce strict customs controls on importing non-Islamic religious texts such as Bibles, as well as on Islamic instructional materials or scriptures intended for sale or distribution. Authorities generally continued to ban the import of non-Islamic religious texts, and the censorship board continued to review Islamic texts to ensure they did not contain text that deviated from the Shafi'i school of Islam."

**Block 1: Additional information**

Meeting with other Christians is particularly difficult for Christians with a Muslim background, since it is dangerous for the converts themselves and could endanger all those attending the meeting. It is also important to note that there is a law in Brunei that prohibits the unauthorized gathering of more than 5 people (although this is hardly ever used for targeting religious meetings).

## Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

**Block 2.6: Christian couples have been hindered in adopting children or serving as foster parents because of their faith. (4.00 points)**

The law bans any Muslim from surrendering custody of a minor or dependent in his or her guardianship to a non-Muslim. Therefore non-Muslims cannot adopt Muslim children, though they can adopt non-Muslim children. They also cannot become foster parents or adopt children whose parents are unknown.

**Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (4.00 points)**

No school, whether private or public, is allowed to teach Christian subjects and all students in primary and secondary schools are required by law to study the national MIB philosophy. One pastor commented that some Christian students can recite the MIB principles better than the



10 commandments. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religious Affairs manage most of the government and private schools in the country. A country expert adds: "The government has made Islamic religious knowledge (IRK) compulsory in all schools in Brunei, which includes private schools too. Per week, there will be one day allocated for reciting the *yassin/surah* and all students including non-Muslims have to join in this." Another country expert stated: "The compulsory MIB studies are quite effective in Islamization." In schools and vocational institutions, all girls are supposed to wear a headscarf.

**Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.75 points)**

Pressure is especially high for children of converts, once it is discovered that their parents are 'apostates'. Along with all non-Muslim women and girls, Christian girls have to wear a hijab in government schools, Teachers also put pressure on children to convert and become Muslims, a pressure that can also come from peers. The pressure on Christians can even be felt in private schools. Christian children are often mocked and ridiculed, for example concerning the concept of the Trinity.

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

Converts cannot be baptized openly and so baptisms rarely take place or have to be done abroad. Baptisms are possibly the strongest sign that a church is alive and growing, and for converts the strongest sign for cutting ties with their former religion. In order to avoid raising too much attention, baptism services are low profile celebrations (even among the other categories of Christian communities).

**Block 2: Additional information**

Converts who are parents find themselves in a dilemma as they hardly dare to raise their children according to their Christian faith, since their children could accidentally reveal their conversion. If Christians with a Muslim background are discovered, they will be isolated and put under pressure to recant their faith. If married, a convert will almost certainly be separated from his or her spouse, who in turn will be forced to divorce. Unmarried converts will have difficulties in finding a spouse and even if they do, legal marriage is almost impossible, even marrying abroad and then having the marriage registered in Brunei is not possible. On the other hand, registration officers are described as being particularly diligent: Unlike in many other Asian countries, the officers are very careful not to make a mistake in the system, so Christians will not be 'accidentally' registered as Muslims.

## Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

**Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (4.00 points)**

With the MIB national philosophy, Islam has permeated into every aspect of society. MIB is a system that encompasses strong Malay cultural influences, stressing the importance of Islam in daily life and governance, and respect for the sultan's monarchy. Thus, Christians are under pressure to take part in Islamic rites and ceremonies. A refusal is seen as a rejection of the cul-

ture, the values of society and - maybe the worst - a rejection of the sultan, who is the very embodiment of all societal values. It has become so much the norm to participate in Islamic prayers before work and in government meetings, and also to participate in Islamic religious studies in schools etc., that Christians hardly notice it as pressure anymore. There are also strict regulations and penalties during Ramadan concerning the observance of Muslim prayer-times both for Muslims and non-Muslims.

**Block 3.7: Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith. (4.00 points)**

Christians with a Muslim background are always under strong pressure from their family, friends and neighbors to give up their Christian faith. But the pressure is equally strongly felt by non-convert Christians due to the government's program of Islamization. Churches are experiencing a gradual reduction in membership; one by one members succumb to Islam, primarily to avoid putting up with the great social pressure but also for monetary benefits like receiving 1,000 BN\$ per year for 10 years. As many churches in Brunei are very small, even if it is 'only' 2 or 3 people in the church who leave, it can have a serious effect on the remaining congregation. Muslim missionary (*dawah*) successes are widely publicized and celebrated in national newspapers, where converts to Islam are announced with their new names (for more details, see below: *Block 3 - Additional information*).

**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.). (3.75 points)**

Especially the Malay-speaking churches are under serious threat and are always monitored, resulting in a high level of caution and fear among church members and leaders. Everyone is aware of the monitoring and surveillance that is being done. Reportedly, in many churches there are informers (sometimes other Christians) sent by the authorities. There is also a strong suspicion that telecommunication channels are monitored, but this is hard to prove. The authorities also extract information from local citizens about church activities.

**Block 3.9: Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education). (3.25 points)**

Courses on Islam and MIB are mandatory in all schools and while non-Muslims have been exempted from some religious requirements, the government reported that many non-Muslim children chose to take courses on Islam. Reportedly, those applying for government-funded scholarships believed that attendance at such courses could be advantageous (according to US State Department IRFR 2022, p.14). Due to economic restraints, the number of university scholarships has been reduced. With numbers decreasing, many Christians feel they have even less chance of getting a place at university in Brunei. As summed up by a country expert: "Christian students and employees working for the government are often overlooked when there are opportunities for higher education or training. Malay Muslims are always favored for scholarships and training."

### **Block 3: Additional information**

Christians are discriminated against in their business lives. With Sharia law in place, the government is gradually implementing more rules and restrictions. Non-Muslims and Muslims face social pressure to conform to Islamic guidelines regarding behavior, for example in dressing in an Islamic way. Women are singled out and expected to wear a hijab at work. During Ramadan, raids are conducted against non-halal restaurants, disrupting the businesses and everyday life of non-Muslims as well as creating fear. Around 50% of conversions to Islam occur among expatriates and are celebrated in newspapers nationwide; whereas often the reason for conversion is to obtain material benefits, in many cases pressure is exerted as well, e.g. Catholic Filipinos often convert to Islam in exchange for work permits; Indian blue collar workers are asked to embrace Islam in exchange for work permits and other fringe benefits. A country expert also shared: "Christians are usually welcome to participate in communal institutions and local forums in the hope that they will convert to Islam." Additionally, Further, there have been more restrictions imposed on non-Bruneian company owners.

## **Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere**

### **Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (4.00 points)**

As mentioned above, the Sharia Penal Code (SPC) was introduced in May 2014. This legal code not only regulates crimes like murder and theft but also affects the public display of Christian symbols, the issue of proselytism, apostasy and many other matters. The implementation of the SPC (procedural code) was almost clandestinely announced in April 2019, leading to an international outcry and to a very rare public reaction by the sultan (for details, see above: *Political and legal/Religious landscape*). No matter how Sharia will be ultimately implemented, freedom of religion is already severely limited in Brunei. It should be noted that - save for a few specific clauses - the SPC applies to everyone, not just Muslims.

### **Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (4.00 points)**

With a sedition law in place and MIB and SPC always at the back of their minds, Christians face limits on how much they can express their views and faith in public. Bruneian Christians are very careful and law-abiding and self-censor to avoid trouble, especially as it is not totally clear what faith-induced statements could be considered seditious. Additionally, even any mild form of criticism would be perceived as ultimately being aimed against the sultan, which is unthinkable.

### **Block 4.6: Christians have been barred from public office, or has promotion been hindered for faith-related reasons. (3.75 points)**

According to the 2020 [Labour Force Survey](#) in Brunei, 32.7% of the labor force are working in the public sector. Christians are not completely barred from public office and even a rare promotion may be granted, but there is a ceiling as to how far they can go. Benefits and promotion are limited to the Malays and converts to Islam, if they are citizens. This adds pressure on Christians to convert because if they do, they can be rewarded with benefits and career ad-

vancement.

**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)**

Although there are a number of political parties active in Brunei, they all abide by the sultan's will, as he holds all power. There are neither Christian political parties nor Christian civil society organizations as they are not allowed in the country. Where civil society organizations are owned by Christians, they do not operate as Christian societies or NGOs but as businesses and fulfil all the statutory requirements set out for standard business practice, e.g. concerning reporting and taxes.

**Block 4: Additional information**

Registering a conversion to Christianity is out of the question. Christians are often subjected to discriminatory treatment when dealing with the authorities. In many cases, when permanent residents with a Chinese, Christian or Buddhist background apply for citizenship, they face rejection or delay, but no official reason is given by the officials. Every Thursday from 8:00am-9:30am, all government offices have time reserved for Islamic prayer and reading the Quran and everyone is required to participate. Christmas decorations are not allowed in public areas (e.g., in supermarkets, parks and streets). However, decorations are allowed in churches and Christian homes.

## Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

**Block 5.2: It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government. (4.00 points)**

Churches which have a registration permit, obtained it in the colonial era and still enjoy its legal status today. Six churches have this status countrywide. However, the government does not allow any further churches to be registered. Even registered churches face problems: In the capital city, Bandar Seri Begawan, the government implements zoning restrictions on Sundays and all roads leading to the Catholic and Anglican churches are closed for "recreational" purposes from 6am to 1pm. Only those with valid permits are allowed to enter the area near the two main churches. All registered churches must provide information on leadership, election of officers, members, assets, activities, and any other information requested by the registrar. All other churches need to become, as one source said, "creative".

**Block 5.11: Pastors or other Christian leaders (or their family members) have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)**

Pastors and Christian leaders are constantly being monitored and placed under pressure by the authorities, which have many ways of making their presence felt. Particular effort is put into harassing pastors, since it is believed that discouraging and intimidating them will have a knock-on effect on a whole congregation. Leaders of unregistered churches are more vulnerable to harassment.

**Block 5.13: Churches have been hindered in importing Christian materials from abroad. (4.00 points)**

There is a permanent ban on importing printed religious material. However, electronic copies of the Bible and other religious material are available, but converts need to be very cautious when accessing these online. A country expert added: "There is no Christian bookstore in the country and while Christians can purchase Christian literature from abroad, it is subject to screening and may take a long time to reach them." Another expert said: "If you go through the BSB airport, they check your ID and if they find out you're a Christian, they will check your bags. Bibles will be confiscated if they find any in your possession."

**Block 5.18: Churches have been hindered in establishing, managing, maintaining and conducting schools, or charitable, humanitarian, medical, social or cultural organizations, institutions and associations. (4.00 points)**

Christian schools in Brunei are subject to the rules of the Bruneian authorities and thus have to hire Muslim teachers and also provide Islamic studies for Muslim pupils. Other Christian organizations cannot be run by churches and have to function as independent entities, operating as professional or business groups. All groups including schools and charity organizations are required to register with the government. Registration can be refused for any reason, and registered groups can be suspended at any time without prior warning or reason.

**Block 5: Additional information**

There is a fatwa that bans non-Muslim worship buildings from being renovated or built, tacitly endorsed by the sultan. Consequently, church buildings deteriorate further and further, but some churches have renovated their buildings without permission.

The US State Department IRFR 2022 (p.13) adds:

- "Christian leaders continued to state that a longstanding fatwa discouraging Muslims from supporting non-Islamic faiths inhibited the expansion or renovation of existing non-Islamic facilities or the construction of new ones. In accordance with the fatwa, government officials slowed or did not process building plans and permits for churches. Christian religious groups said that authorities generally only permitted churches and associated schools to repair and renovate buildings on their sites if required for safety. The process for obtaining approval to renovate church buildings and associated school buildings remained lengthy and difficult, and there were continuing reports of the government stalling new construction projects for not meeting the complicated requirements. With only six approved churches in the country, the last built in the 1960s before the country gained independence, facilities were often too small to accommodate their congregations without significant overflow seating outdoors."

As already mentioned above, many young Christians are leaving the country, thus causing worry about how future church leadership roles will be filled. 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. Because Sunday services are monitored closely, pastors (especially those preaching in

Bahasa Malay) are very careful not to say anything in their sermons that could be interpreted as criticizing or offending the government or the royal family.

Published materials are also subject to scrutiny. The distribution of Bibles and other Christian materials is punishable under Sharia law; anyone sending or delivering publications relating to religion other than Islam to Muslims (or persons having no religion) that was not requested by the person, is liable to be sentenced to up to 6 months imprisonment and/or receive a fine of up to \$2,000 BND. Churches are allowed to sell Christian materials to members of their congregations privately. No Christian activities are allowed in public. Using mass media to present one's faith is forbidden in Brunei as this is an offence under "Propagating a religion other than Islam" and is punishable by imprisonment of maximum five years and a fine up to \$20,000 BND.

## Violence

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

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

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

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

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

### **3. The use of symbolic numbers:**

- *In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10\*, 100\* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10\* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100\* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000\* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for sym-*

*bold numbers 10,000\*, 100,000\* and 1,000,000\*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.*

<b>Brunei: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire</b>	<b>WWL 2024</b>	<b>WWL 2023</b>
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	1	0
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	0	0
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?	0	0
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	0	0
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	1	0
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?	0	0
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?	0	0
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	10 *	5

Although the violence score in the WWL 2024 report tripled (from 0.4 points to 1.3), persecution has never been particularly violent in Brunei. However, the level of overall persecution is enough to cause converts to go into hiding and to cause some Christians to leave the country.

## 5 Year trends

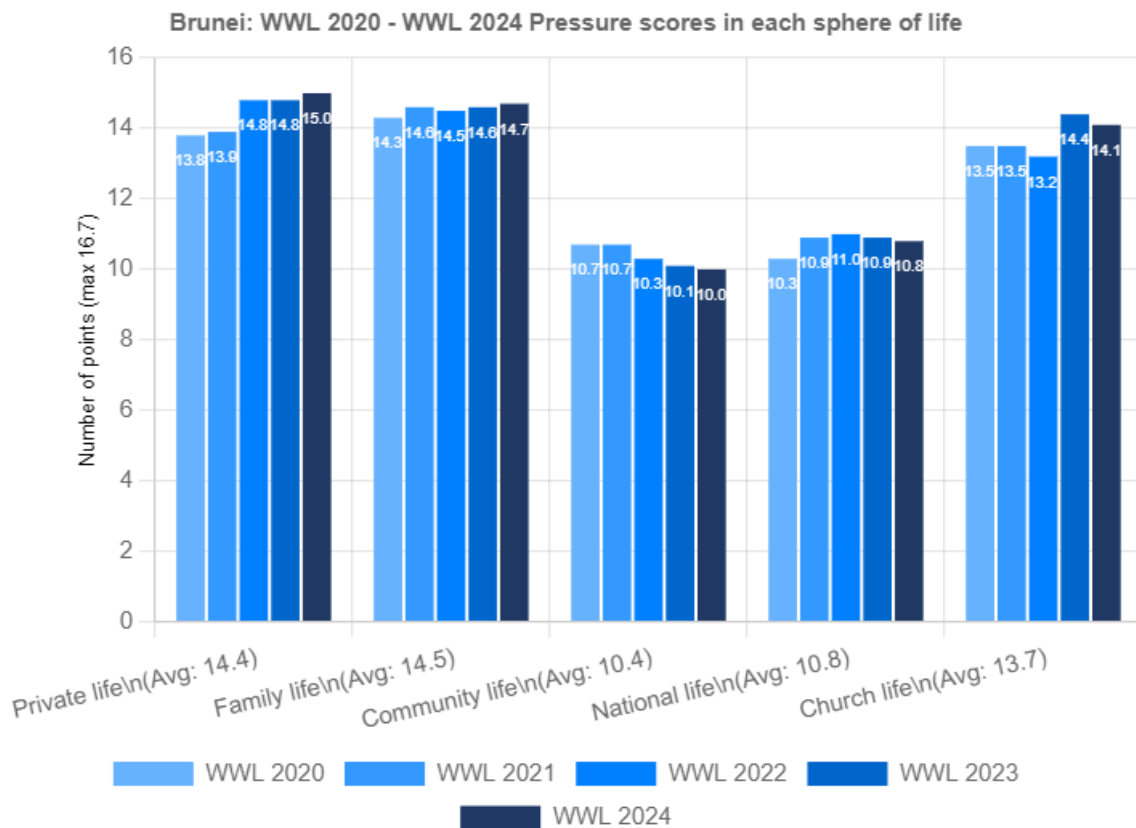
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

## 5 Year trends: Average pressure

Brunei: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	12.9
2023	13.0
2022	12.7
2021	12.7
2020	12.5

The score for average pressure has continually been at a very high level and is currently stable at a range of 12.7 - 13.0 points. So far, the implementation of Sharia Penal Law has not affected the level of pressure on Christians.

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



The chart shows that the levels of pressure in the *Private and Family spheres of life* have always been extremely high in the last 5 WWL reporting periods. The scores in *Church life* have also been repeatedly at the top end of very high and joined the other extremely high spheres since WWL 2023.



## 5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



The chart above shows that the violence score has consistently been very low for Brunei. However, it tripled in the WWL 2024 reporting period with an increased number of reports coming in. The still very low violence score can partly be explained by the difficulty researchers experience in obtaining reports concerning - above all - the treatment of converts.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Denied custody of children; Forced marriage
Security	Incarceration by family (house arrest)
Social and Cultural	Enforced religious dress code; Violence – psychological
Technological	-

Although Brunei is a signatory to international conventions on the rights of women, such as CEDAW, Human Rights Watch reported in May 2019 about the [threat](#) the new Syariah Penal Code poses to minority groups such as women and religious minorities (HRW, 22 May 2019). Despite international condemnation, rights and freedom continue to be restricted, and Brunei’s human rights record has come under harsh [criticism](#) (The Diplomat, 29 October, 2021).

Male and female converts to Christianity face the most pressure for their faith. Due to the ever-stricter implementation of Islamic laws, women are forced to wear a hijab and are punished by the religious authorities when they refuse to wear one. Within schools, universities and workplaces they particularly risk discrimination if unveiled. This generally does not apply to known Christian families, but to converts (although all women need to wear a veil if in government positions).

Similar to the experience of male converts, women and girls are usually disowned by the family when their conversion becomes known. The family often isolates them, can put them under house arrest, and Imams can be called to make them recant. They may also be forced to attend Islamic spiritual rehabilitation programs. For unmarried women, sometimes their families also threaten them with forced marriage to Muslim men they know. Married converts to Christianity risk having their children taken away from them in order to ensure they are raised as Muslims. Custody decisions are not gender-specific, but the law bans surrendering the custody of a minor to a Muslim convert.

### Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Imprisonment by government
Security	Forced out of home – expulsion; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

As previously mentioned, male and female converts to Christianity face the strongest levels of pressure for their faith. Some men and boys are disowned by the family when they convert and are forced to leave the family home. Students also risk discrimination and verbal abuse within educational settings.

Male converts may further face beatings, humiliation and harsher treatment when persecuted by religious authorities. If men and boys are identified by the security department, they are put under pressure to recant their Christian faith, including being threatened with imprisonment. This affects their wider family and brings shame to the community.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Brunei, pp.13-14):

- "The government bans religious groups it considers 'deviant', including the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, al-Arqam, Abdul Razak Mohammad, al-Ma'unah, Saihoni Tasipan, Tariqat Mufarridiyyah, Silat Lintau, Qadiyaniah, the Baha'i Faith, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The list is based on fatwas proclaimed by the State Mufti or the Islamic Religious Council – a government body and the Sultan's most senior advisors on matters on Islam – and is available on MORA's website. The SPC also bans most non-Sunni forms of Islam, as well as any practice or display of "black magic."" (Page 7)
- "As in past years, the government limited traditional Chinese Lunar New Year lion dance performances to a three-day period and restricted them to the country's sole Chinese Buddhist temple, Chinese school halls, and private residencies of Chinese Association members (comprised of the members of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and several other Chinese business associations). Members of the royal family publicly attended Lunar New Year celebrations and lion dance performances during the allowed period, with extensive coverage in state-influenced media. Public entertainment is generally barred on specified Islamic holidays." (Page 12)
- "Members of non-Sunni religious groups again reported that some individuals who wished to convert to another religion continued to fear social retribution, such as ostracism by friends, family, and their community. If parents converted to Islam, there was often family and official pressure for the children to do the same if they were not young enough to have been automatically converted with their parents. Some non-Muslims said they continued to feel pressured in the workplace or in social groups to convert to Islam. While the SPC outlined harsh punishments for Muslims converting to another religion, there were no known cases during the year of the government having applied those penalties. Non-Muslims reported, however, that government officials monitored their religious services and events to ensure that no Muslims attended and that there was no anti-Islamic content." (Pages 17-18)

Non-Sunni Muslim groups seen as deviant - such as Shiites and Ahmadis - are banned and persecuted. Atheism is not allowed and the activities of Hindus have also been restricted: The only Hindu temple in the country is located in the British military barracks of the Gurkha regiment. Sikh and Buddhist communities also visit the temple to pray. Chinese residents have been banned from celebrating their new year with the dragon dance. The indigenous Iban community, many of whom are animist, are particularly targeted for *dawah* (Islamic mission).

In what was said to be a first, on 15 October 2019, a non-Muslim was [charged under Sharia law](#) for theft (Borneo Bulletin, 15 October 2019). Posts on social media in Brunei expressed shock that Sharia law was evidently now applicable to non-Muslims, too.

## Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

### **Islamic oppression, blended with Dictatorial paranoia**

Although Brunei seems to have weathered the COVID-19 pandemic and the related economic challenges reasonably well so far, the increased insecurity may lead to a stronger emphasis on ideology. By pushing for the introduction of Sharia law well before the pandemic arrived (and by issuing a ban on public Christian celebrations), the sultan is evidently relying on a conservative brand of Islam - certainly out of conviction - but also as a means of keeping his people in check. The influence of *Islamic oppression* and *Dictatorial paranoia* thus looks set to increase in the future, especially since the sultan may be feeling the need to leave a lasting legacy as he enters old age.

## External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Block 4.6: Christians have been barred from public office, or has promotion been hindered for faith-related reasons. (3.75 points): Labour Force Survey - [https://deps.mofe.gov.bn/DEPD%20Documents%20Library/DOS/Labour%20force%20survey\\_KTK/2020/RPT\\_2020.pdf](https://deps.mofe.gov.bn/DEPD%20Documents%20Library/DOS/Labour%20force%20survey_KTK/2020/RPT_2020.pdf)
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: threat - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/05/22/bruneis-pernicious-new-penal-code>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: criticism - <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/asean-summit-should-draw-attention-to-bruneis-appalling-human-rights-record/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: charged under Sharia law - <https://borneobulletin.com.bn/man-stole-mothers-gas-cylinder-behind-bars/%20>

## Further useful reports

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

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

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

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