

WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

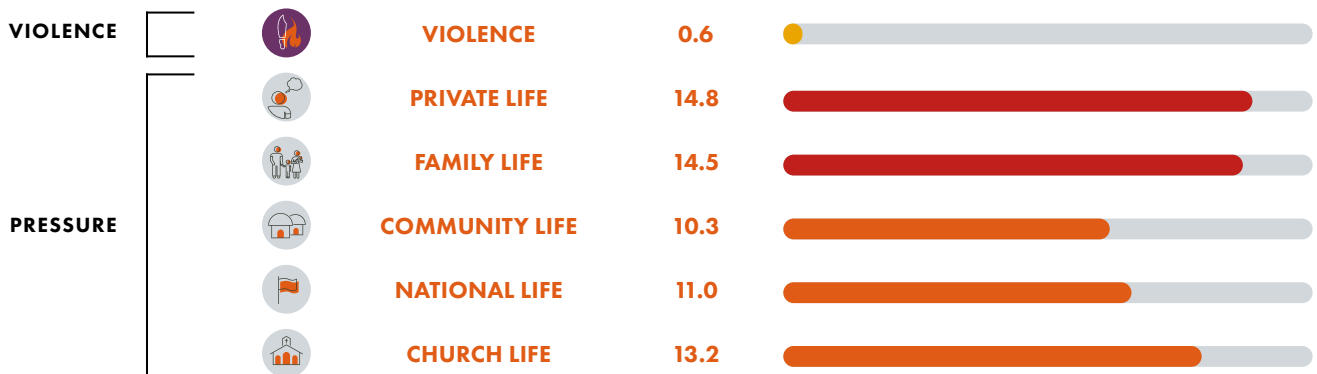
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
46

Brunei



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).¹ Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

Key findings

Converts from Islam face pressure from their families (communities) and conversion is punishable by Sharia Penal Law if a case is brought against them. Everything will be done to bring them back to their original faith. Non-traditional Christian communities cannot be registered as churches, but to operate legally they are 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.

¹World Watch Research measures pressure across all spheres of life as well as violence (full methodology [here](#) – password: freedom).

Quick facts

LEADER

Sultan and Prime Minister Sir Hassanal Bolkiah

POPULATION

450,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

42,600 (OD estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Absolute monarchy



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Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	42,600	9.5
Muslims	269,700	59.9
Buddhists	44,300	9.8
Ethno-religionists	46,351	10.3

Source²

In Brunei, the sultan rules as **absolute monarch**. People deeply respect the sultan and there is little demand for more political participation. Until now, the government has provided free medical services and subsidizes goods such as rice and housing. State schooling is free and citizens of Brunei do not have to pay income tax.

²Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021) (Adapted according to OD-estimate)

The national philosophy is Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) - a blend of Malay and Islamic cultural values guarded by the monarchy. May 2014 saw the introduction of Sharia Penal Code (which also applies to non-Muslims); however, **implementation did not happen until 2019**. International media was quick to highlight the **serious consequences** for the LGBTI community in the country and there were calls to boycott all luxury hotels belonging to a company owned by the sultan. So far, **no cases** against religious minorities (or the LGBTI community) have been reported.

Ethnically Malay Bruneians comprise 66% of the population and are presumed to be Muslim. The Chinese population, approximately 10% of the total, is 65% Buddhist and 20% Christian. Christians are free to worship, but they have been warned against doing outreach or becoming too public.

How the situation varies by region

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

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

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

Historical Christian communities

This includes the Roman Catholic and Anglican Church. They are strictly monitored and must exercise caution, though they experience less pressure than newer Protestant groups and converts.

Converts to Christianity

Converts from a Muslim background face strong pressure from family and friends, as conversion is considered illegal. Should someone's conversion become known, authorities will step in to bring them back to their original faith.

Non-traditional Christian communities

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

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression, blended with dictatorial paranoia:

Sharia law in its civil and administrative dimension was fully implemented even before Brunei's independence in 1984. The government has offered incentives to prospective converts to Islam (especially from indigenous communities) including help with housing and welfare. Family members and neighbors can easily create trouble for converts to Christianity by reporting them to the security department (the KDN), which is frequently happening. A government body, the Malay Islamic Monarchy Supreme Council, seeks to spread MIB philosophy and ensure it is enshrined in the nation's laws and policies.

beatings, humiliation and harsher treatment when persecuted by religious authorities. Students may also experience discrimination and verbal abuse within educational settings.

- Forced divorce
- Forced out of home/expulsion
- Incarceration by government
- Violence - verbal

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution score out of 100
2022	46	64.28
2021	39	64.32
2020	37	63.08
2019	36	62.66
2018	26	63.75

The score in WWL 2022 remained unchanged, reflecting a stable but difficult situation for Christians in the country. The implementation of Sharia Penal Code has not affected the score yet. It remains to be seen what this law will mean for Christians, apart from increased insecurity and fear.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

While Brunei is a CEDAW-signatory country, women and religious minorities are under threat from the new Sharia Penal Code. Due to stricter implementation of Islamic laws, Christian women in general should dress modestly, but are not forced to wear a hijab. Women and girls are usually disowned by the family when their conversion becomes known. They may be forced to attend spiritual rehabilitation programs. Sometimes, women are threatened with forced marriage to a Muslim, or if married, may have their children taken away to ensure a Muslim upbringing.

- Denied custody of children
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced marriage
- Forced out of home/expulsion
- Violence - psychological
- Violence - verbal

MEN

Converts to Christianity face the strongest levels of pressure for their faith. Men and boys are usually disowned by the family when they convert and are forced to leave the family home. They also face



Examples of violence in the reporting period

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

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained	Christians forced to flee their countries
2022	0	0	0	10
2021	0	0	1	10

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - see [here](#) for full results. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.

Private life

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

Family life

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

Community life

Islam has permeated every aspect of society and Christians are under pressure from society and the government to take part in Islamic rites and ceremonies. There are strict regulations and penalties during Ramadan concerning the observance of Muslim prayer times both for Muslims and non-Muslims. Churches are experiencing a gradual reduction in membership as people leave for Islam, primarily to avoid social pressure but also for monetary benefits like receiving 1,000 BN\$ per year for 10 years. Islamic missionary (‘dawah’) efforts are widely publicized and celebrated in national newspapers, where converts are announced with their new names.

National life

With a sedition law in place and MIB and Sharia Penal Code always in the back of their minds, Christians are very careful to self-censor to avoid trouble, especially as it is not totally clear which statements could be considered seditious. Benefits and promotions are limited to Malays and converts to Islam, if they are citizens, which adds pressure on Christians to convert.

Church life

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



International obligations & rights violated

Brunei has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights 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:

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

Situation of other religious minorities

The Sultan publicly warned the government to strengthen its stance against deviation from what he called authentic Islamic teachings. Non-Sunni Muslim groups seen as deviant, such as Shiite and Ahmadis, are banned and persecuted. Atheism is also not allowed. The activities of Hindus have 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.



Open Doors in Brunei

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



About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2021 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- The full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology, as well as the complete WWL 2022 ranking and reports, can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
