

Displaced For Development

Status of Human Rights in Bhutan 2026



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STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN BHUTAN 2026

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ACRONYMS

ACC	Anti-Corruption Commission
AI	Amnesty International
BBS	Bhutan Broadcasting Service
BICMA	Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority
BLMIS	Bhutan Labour Market Information System
BMC	Bhutan Media Council
BMF	Bhutan Media Foundation
BTP	Bhutan Tendrel Party
CDO	Chief District Officer
COVID	Corona Virus Disease -19
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSOA	Civil Society Organisations Authority
ECB	Election Commission of Bhutan
ECCD	Early Childhood Care and Development
EVM	Electronic Voting Machine
FYP	Five-Year Planning
GBV	Gender-based Violence
GCRPPB	Global Campaign for Release of Political Prisoners
GMC	Gelephu Mindfulness City
GNH	Gross National Happiness

HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICE	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
ILO	International Labour Organisation
JAB	Journalists Association of Bhutan
LFPR	Labor Force Participation Rate
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
MBO	Mutual Benefit Organisation
MPI	Media Perception Index
NCWC	National Commission for Women and Children
NGEP	National Gender Equality Policy
NOC	No Objection Certificate
NRP	National Reintegration Program
OAP	Open Air Prison
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
OHS	Occupational Health and Safety
PBO	Public Benefit Organisation
RADA	Rules for Administrative Disciplinary Actions
RBP	Royal Bhutan Police
RCSC	Royal Civil Service Commission
RENEW	Respect, Educate, Nurture, Empower Women
RTI	Right to Information
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure

STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
UN	United Nations
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United National Development Program
USD	United States Dollar
WGAD	Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (UN)

Non-English Words

Gewog	Block of villages
Gup	Elected head of the Block Assembly
Tshogpa	Elected member (representing a village) of the Block Assembly
Mangmi	Elected Deputy of the Block Assembly
Lhotshampa	Nepali-speaking Bhutanese
Gyalsung	Guardian of the Nation (compulsory volunteering program)

Foreword

This report provides an overview of the human rights situation in Bhutan during 2025. It is written with the aim of supporting informed discussion—within Bhutan and among international partners—about how constitutional guarantees, domestic law, and administrative practice interact in the everyday lives of citizens. The report does not seek to diminish Bhutan’s widely recognised achievements in social development and public administration. Rather, it focuses on areas where rights protections appear uneven, where accountability mechanisms are limited, or where policy choices have generated credible concerns from affected communities and independent observers.

The sections that follow examine several interconnected themes - political participation, political prisoners and arbitrary detention, civil liberties, migration and citizenship, freedom of association and religion, discrimination and gender-based violence, labour rights, crime and safety trends, and internal displacement linked to both development initiatives and climate-related hazards. The report closes by assessing the institutional landscape, including the continuing absence of an independent national human rights institution consistent with the Paris Principles.

The report draws on publicly available information, including government statements and statistics, parliamentary and regulatory material where accessible, media reporting, and analysis from domestic and international organisations. It also reflects recurring issues raised in multilateral processes, including the Universal Periodic Review and other UN human rights mechanisms. Given Bhutan’s small media market, limited access-to-information pathways, and constraints on independent civic activity, some issues are difficult to document comprehensively. Where information is contested or incomplete, the report seeks to describe the nature of the concern, identify the sources that have raised it, and situate it within the relevant legal and policy context.

We offer this assessment in the spirit of constructive engagement. Strengthening rights protections does not require abandoning Bhutan’s development philosophy; it requires ensuring that institutions and laws provide practical remedies when

rights are limited, and that all communities can participate in public life without fear of exclusion or reprisal. In particular, the report underscores the importance of transparent legal safeguards, independent oversight, and an enabling environment for media and civil society.

It is our hope that the findings and recommendations that emerge from this analysis will contribute to dialogue, guide reform efforts, and support Bhutan's stated commitments to good governance, rule of law, and the well-being of all people within its jurisdiction.

Freedom to Participate in Political Process

No major parliamentary or local government elections were held in 2025. National Assembly by-election was held in Nubi-Tangsibji constituency in Trongsa district on September 4. The seat remained vacant following the resignation of Tashi Dorji of the opposition party Bhutan Tendrel Party (BTP). Dorji was detained following his conviction of child molestation case by the High Court on June 2. The High Court upheld the 10 April 2025 judgment of the Trongsa District Court, sentencing him to three years, three months, and 21 days for sexually molesting a 14-year-old girl on 4 September 2022. At the time of the incident, he was serving as a Gewog Administration Officer in Trongsa.

The by-election saw 51.66% (EVM 1792+Postal 739 = 2,531) voter turnout out of the registered 4,899 registered eligible voters (Male: 2265 & Female: 2634). The by-election showed the fragility of political accountability in Bhutan. While the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) conducted the by-election in line with constitutional provisions, the incident raised questions about vetting and ethical standards among elected representatives.

Efforts to increase women's participation in politics were visible, with capacity-building programs organised in 2025 to train young women for leadership roles. While such initiatives were welcomed, structural barriers remained. Bhutan ranked poorly in global gender indices, with only 17% of elected seats held by women, reflecting the gap between policy and practice.

Several by-elections were held for local government bodies in 2025.

District	Gewog	Position	Elected	Voter Turnout
Trongsa	Korphu	Gup	Kuenzang Choden	67.6%
Pema Gatshel	Nanong	Tshogpa	Jigme Dorji	29.10%
Chukha	Chapchha	Gup	Phub Sithup	44.84%
Punakha	Goenshari	Gup	Ugyen Dorji	71.76%
Trashigang	Yangnyer	Tshogpa	Rinzin Wangdi	52.55%

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Dagana	Goshi	Gup	Tshering Dorji Ghishing	49.96%
Punakha	Barp	Tshogpa	Kinley	38.5%
Bumthang	Ura	Gup	Chimi Tobgay	43.28%
Gasa	Khamaed	Mangmi	Pema Wangdi	69.14%
Samtse	Tendruk	Tshogpa	Anil Rai	42.5%
Chukha	Doongna	Tshogpa	Lhab Tshering	66.67%
Chukha	Getana	Tshogpa	Nima	54.49%

Political Prisoners and Arbitrary Detention

The issue of political prisoners remained unresolved in 2025. At least 30 political prisoners continued to be held in Bhutanese prisons, many since the early 1990s out of whom 5 are reportedly in serious health conditions. One of them, Sha Bahadur Gurung, died mysteriously on 15 December 2025 at his cell in Chamgang Central Prison after 35 years of being arrested for his involvement in the prodemocracy protest. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) and other international human rights groups reiterated their call for the release of these prisoners, declaring the detentions illegal under international law.

Reports from international human rights bodies, including Amnesty International (AI), Human Rights Watch (HRW), and mechanisms of the United Nations, continue to raise concern regarding the existence and treatment of political prisoners in Bhutan. These reports indicate that several individuals, many from the Lhotshampa (ethnic Nepali) community, have been detained for extended periods, allegedly in connection with peaceful political expression, dissent.

The detainees, convicted under the National Security Act, have been held without adequate due process, including limited access to legal representation, lack of transparent judicial proceedings, and, in some cases, allegations of torture or ill-treatment in custody. The WGAD raised concerns that certain cases may constitute arbitrary detention under international law. International advocacy groups, including European Union, are actively working to promote prisoner release and judicial reform in Bhutan. The Global Campaign for the Release of Political Prisoners in Bhutan (GCRPPB) and HRW are at the frontline of these advocacy campaign - documenting cases, collecting testimonies, and seeking international attention on long-term detainees.

Severe overcrowding is reported at the Chamgang Prison, with 653 inmates housed in a facility built for 400. The Royal Bhutan Police (RBP) attempted to address this through Open-Air Prison (OAP) programs, where inmates were deployed to Gyalsung project sites and religious institutions. While these initiatives provided

some relief, they did not address the plight of political detainees, who remained excluded from such programs.

Exile-based activists also drew attention to deportations of former political prisoners. Two long-term detainees released in recent years were forcibly deported to Nepal despite being citizens of Bhutan, violating their right to nationality. This practice mirrored the ethnic expulsions of the 1990s and reinforced concerns about Bhutan's impunity in handling dissent.

Civil Liberties

Freedom of media and right to expression

Bhutan's Constitution guarantees freedom of speech, information, and the press (Article 7.5), but the absence of a Right to Information (RTI) Act and the presence of restrictive laws continued to undermine these rights in practice. The Information, Communications and Media Act 2018 confirmed the powers of Bhutan Information, Communication and Media Authority (BICMA), whose five members are directly appointed by the government, raising concerns about regulatory independence.

Defamation and libel remained criminal offenses under the Penal Code, carrying penalties of fines and up to three years' imprisonment. The National Security Act penalise any attempt to create 'misunderstanding or hostility between the government and the people,' further chilling journalistic freedom.

In 2025, Bhutan had seven newspapers, one public service television broadcaster (Bhutan Broadcasting Service, BBS), three commercial radio stations, and a growing number of digital and over-the-top (OTT) platforms. The sector continued to face acute financial instability, with private outlets particularly vulnerable due to declining advertising revenues, increased operational costs, and heavy reliance on government subsidies.

Private newspapers and radio stations reported narrow profit margins and, in some cases, operational losses. The government's continued austerity measures, including the shift of public notices and advertisements to electronic procurement systems, further eroded traditional revenue streams for private media. This led to the closure of regional bureaus, staff reductions, and diminished local coverage.

The state-owned BBS remained heavily dependent on government funding. According to the 2024-25 national budget, BBS received a direct subsidy of Nu. 247.68 million, accounting for over 80% of its operational budget. BBS's own revenue generation remained limited, with commercial earnings and internal sources contributing less than 20% of its budget. The broadcaster continued to operate at a loss, ranking as one of the largest loss-making state enterprises.

Physical infrastructure investments remained limited in 2025. While BBS maintained its multi-platform presence (TV, radio, digital), private outlets struggled to upgrade equipment or expand digital operations due to financial constraints. The BICMA continued to support digital infrastructure through the Universal Service Fund, but rural connectivity gaps remained, affecting both content dissemination and news gathering, especially outside urban centers.

Sustainability emerged as a critical concern. The Bhutan Media Foundation (BMF) and sectoral commentators highlighted the need for new metrics in media rankings. They stress that the ranking metrics should include not only financial independence and reach but also social responsibility, environmental stewardship, and alignment with national goals such as Gross National Happiness (GNH). However, the small market size, declining readership, and limited private advertising continued to threaten the viability of many outlets.

The 2025 Media Perception Index (MPI) survey, conducted by Journalist Association of Bhutan (JAB) and supported by the Department of Media, Creative Industry and Intellectual Property, provided the most comprehensive data on audience engagement. The survey, covering 703 respondents across 14 districts, revealed that traditional media retained high levels of public trust, but digital and social media platforms had overtaken them in popularity and reach.

BBS TV was the most widely consumed and trusted platform, with over 60% of respondents engaging weekly or more frequently. Kuensel was the most accessed newspaper, with 39% reporting weekly readership, though 32% never read it. The Bhutanese had the most dedicated readership among private papers, with 11% reading it multiple times daily. Other private newspapers like Business Bhutan, Bhutan Times, and Bhutan Today had mid-tier engagement, with weekly readership rates of 20–30% and high non-readership rates (36–43%). The Journalist and Gyalchi Sarshog had the lowest reach, with only 1–2% daily readership and nearly 50% never reading them.

Digital transformation accelerated in 2025. According to DataReportal, Bhutan had approximately 706,000 internet users (88.4% penetration) and 485,000 social media users (60.8% of the population) at the end of 2025. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, and YouTube dominated digital engagement, with TikTok and Instagram also gaining traction among youth.

Despite high usage, trust in social media for news remained low, with an average trustworthiness rating of just 2.76 out of 5 in the MPI survey. General online news websites also scored low (2.79), reflecting concerns over misinformation and media bias.

The MPI survey found that the average perception score for Bhutanese media was 3.81 out of 5, indicating moderate public trust in traditional outlets. BBS TV scored highest in credibility (4.02), followed by Kuensel (3.89) and The Bhutanese (3.73). However, trust in social media and foreign media (notably Indian TV) was significantly lower - skepticism about misinformation and perceived bias.

Rural residents expressed more positive views of the media compared to urban counterparts. Women and those with less formal education tended to hold more favourable perceptions, while higher education levels correlated with more critical perspectives. Youth engagement was particularly high on digital platforms, raising concerns about the dilution of traditional values and exposure to inappropriate content.

Editorial independence continued to erode in 2025. The dissolution of the Bhutan Media Council in 2023 removed a key mechanism for self-regulation and public accountability, leaving a regulatory vacuum. The concentration of leadership roles—where nearly half of media houses combined CEO and editor-in-chief positions—raised concerns about conflicts of interest and editorial autonomy. But Bhutan’s media industry has no choice but to have the overlap roles considering the industry size and the team it can financially sustain.

Self-censorship was pervasive. Over 80% of journalists admitted to avoiding sensitive topics due to fear of reprisal, legal consequences, or management pressure. The 2025 Rapid Assessment Survey by JAB found that only 10% of journalists felt comfortable pursuing investigative stories, while 55% were very hesitant to do so. The main drivers of self-censorship were ‘small society syndrome’ (fear of social backlash in a close-knit society) and external pressures from authorities.

Most journalists focused on non-controversial news items, with limited coverage of politics, economy, or investigative topics. According to the BMF State of Journalism Survey, 56% of journalists primarily wrote news articles, while only 3%

engaged in investigative reporting. Social issues (61%) and the economy (15%) were the most covered topics, with culture, entertainment, politics, and sports comprising the remainder.

The digital shift brought both opportunities and challenges. While online platforms enabled wider reach and new forms of storytelling, they also intensified competition, reduced advertising revenue for traditional outlets, and amplified the spread of misinformation. However, the lack of a unified, whole-of-government strategy for digital transformation and media literacy limited the effectiveness of these efforts. Concerns remain about the sustainability of traditional media and the need for regulatory reforms to address the challenges of the digital era.

Journalist attrition remained another major concern. A study by the Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies found that more than 60% of senior journalists left the profession between 2021 and 2023, with many migrating abroad or shifting to other professions. The main reasons cited were low salaries, lack of professional development, and limited career prospects. The influx of inexperienced journalists further weakened the sector's capacity for in-depth reporting and critical analysis.

The Social and Cultural Affairs Committee of the National Council conducted a review of the state of media in 2025 and raised concerns about financial instability, outdated regulatory frameworks, and limited access to information.

BBS, as the state broadcaster, remained under tight government oversight, with its editorial board and CEO appointed by the Ministry of Finance. Despite public assurances of autonomy, BBS lacked legally enshrined safeguards for editorial independence and continued to function as an instrument of state communication.

BICMA maintained a stringent approach toward mainstream media, enforcing licensing requirements and content regulations. However, digital platforms and social media operated with minimal oversight, creating regulatory asymmetries and challenges in combating misinformation.

Bhutan remained one of the safest countries in South Asia for journalists in terms of physical threats. There were no reported incidents of journalist killings, abductions, or illegal detentions in 2025. However, non-physical forms of mistreatment were prevalent. Women journalists faced higher risks of sexual harassment and workplace discrimination, though the sector reported progress toward gender parity. Freelancers and online journalists were more vulnerable to online abuse and lacked institutional support for safety and legal protection.

Organisational support for journalists facing threats remained limited. Only 40% of journalists reported that their workplace had a safety and security policy, and just 31% said such policies were effectively implemented. Post-incident support (legal aid, counseling, paid leave) was perceived as moderate to unlikely, leaving many journalists without effective protection mechanisms.

Several journalists recounted experiences of harassment, intimidation, and pressure to reveal sources, particularly when covering sensitive political or economic stories. The culture of self-censorship and avoidance of controversial topics remained the standard culture. Self-censorship was widespread, with 84% of journalists admitting to avoiding sensitive topics. Male journalists were one and a half times more likely to self-censor than their female counterparts. The main reasons cited were fear of backlash, small society syndrome, and external regulations. The dissolution of the Bhutan Media Council (BMC) in 2023, the withdrawal of government advertising from critical outlets, and the criminalisation of defamation have created a climate of self-censorship.

External censorship was reported by about one-third of journalists, with armed forces, regulatory authorities, and ministries most likely to impose restrictions. Pre-publication censorship was less prevalent for online publications, but post-publication takedowns and blocking occurred in some cases.

Access to information remained one of the most persistent challenges for Bhutanese journalists in 2025. Despite constitutional guarantees, the absence of an RTI Act and the proliferation of bureaucratic procedures severely limited timely and accurate information gathering. Journalists were often required to submit written questions and wait for responses that could take weeks or even months. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) in government ministries and the judiciary centralised press interactions and enabled editorial control over what information was released. The Anti-Corruption Commission's Model Public Service Code of Conduct and the Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC)'s Rules for Administrative Disciplinary Actions (RADA) further discouraged civil servants from engaging with the media. The lack of access to information led to delayed, diluted, or abandoned stories, undermining the media's ability to inform the public and hold institutions accountable. Information gaps created space for speculation and misinformation, eroding public trust in both the media and state institutions.

The need for an RTI Act was widely recognised by journalists, editors, and sectoral organisations. At a JAB-organised forum in December 2025, participants argued that without enabling legislation, the constitutional right to information remained largely theoretical. Recommendations included establishing clear disclosure mechanisms, proactive publication of public records, and balancing access with responsibility through legal safeguards.

Social media platforms became the dominant source of information for many Bhutanese in 2025, with 61% of the population active on at least one platform. While these platforms enabled greater participation and alternative viewpoints, they also amplified misinformation, hate speech, and online harassment.

Defamation and libel remained criminal offenses, and several journalists faced charges or legal threats in 2025. While some cases were dismissed by the courts, the chilling effect of potential prosecution continued to deter critical reporting and online expression.

Media coverage of Lhotshampa-disenfranchisement was limited, and foreign journalists were not permitted to conduct independent reporting in southern districts.

Bhutan's press freedom ranking plummeted from 33rd in 2022 to 152nd in 2025 in the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, placing it among the most difficult environments for media in the region. The decline was attributed to low scores in social (self-censorship), economic (financial instability), political (regulatory pressure), and legal (access to information) indicators.

Travel and migration rights

The year saw the continuation—and in some respects, the intensification—of trends observed in the preceding years: high rates of emigration among educated youth and professionals, growing concerns over the sustainability of public service delivery.

The exodus of Bhutanese citizens, particularly to Australia, continued at an unprecedented pace in 2025. According to the World Bank's *Migration Dynamics in Bhutan: Recent Trends, Drivers, and Implications* report, the number of Bhutanese residing abroad reached approximately 66,000 by mid-2025, representing about

8.5% of the national population. This diaspora was heavily concentrated among skilled professionals, educators, and healthcare workers.

The surge in migration was particularly pronounced in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic. Monthly departures from Paro International Airport, which had averaged fewer than 500 per year before the pandemic, soared to over 5,000 by early 2023 and remained elevated through 2025. The stock of Bhutanese migrants in Australia more than doubled from 12,424 in 2020 to 25,363 in 2024, with further increases projected in 2025. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that 13,406 Bhutanese students were enrolled in Australian universities between January and September 2024, and this trend continued into 2025. From July to December 2025, Australia granted visa to a total of 5,916 Bhutanese.

Other destinations included the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the Middle East, though Australia remained the dominant corridor for high-skilled migration. About 53% of migrants held university degrees, compared to just 7% of the general working-age population, and nearly half (49%) were former civil servants, with the education and health sectors particularly affected. Those who left cite the real issues were the undemocratic practices of the administration.

In response to the migration crisis, the Royal Government of Bhutan intensified efforts to encourage the return and reintegration of Bhutanese living abroad. The National Reintegration Program (NRP), led by the Department of Employment and Entrepreneurship, registered 573 returnees by mid-2025, with 170 having already resettled and contributed domestically. By March 2025, 524 candidates had registered for the program, with 248 having returned to Bhutan. The majority of returnees expressed a preference for administrative roles within the civil service, citing job security and structured career progression as key attractions.

While Bhutan has respected right to migration, the downstream services, that government is obliged to deliver the citizens, have negative impacts.

Stateless and Citizenship

Bhutan's citizenship regime remains among the most restrictive in South Asia. The 1985 Act, with its *jus sanguinis* (blood-based) approach, requires both parents to be

Bhutanese for a child to acquire citizenship by birth, and sets stringent requirements for naturalisation, including long-term residency, proficiency in Dzongkha, and demonstrated loyalty to the King and the nation. The government retains broad discretion to deny or revoke citizenship, particularly for naturalised citizens, and there is no legal pathway for stateless persons or refugees to regularise their status.

The Immigration Act of 2007 further entrenches these restrictions, dividing non-citizens into various categories with limited rights and subjecting them to periodic registration and surveillance. The Act also criminalises unauthorised presence, employment, and movement, and grants immigration officers extensive powers of search, detention, and removal.

Despite periodic calls from the United Nations and international human rights bodies, Bhutan has not ratified the 1954 or 1961 Statelessness Conventions, nor has it established a legal or administrative mechanism for the recognition or protection of stateless persons.

Despite the passage of more than three decades since the mass expulsions of the early 1990s, thousands of Lhotshampas remain stateless within and outside Bhutan, denied citizenship, land rights, access to education, and public employment. There were no reports in 2025 of any new legal or administrative initiatives to resolve their status. The government continued to reject international appeals for restitution, repatriation, or the establishment of a mechanism for regularisation.

The situation of Lhotshampa refugees in Nepal also remained dire. As of 2025, over 7,000 Bhutanese refugees were still confined to two camps in eastern Nepal, with no prospect of return or local integration. The Nepalese government, facing its own political and corruption scandals related to fake refugee documentation, provided little support or protection to the remaining genuine refugees, who were increasingly marginalised and deprived of basic services.

Forced Deportation

A defining feature of 2025 was the forced deportation of former Bhutanese refugees from the United States, only for them to be expelled to India or Nepal, effectively rendering them stateless once more. At least 20 former refugees—most

of whom had been legally resettled in the U.S.—were deported to Bhutan between March and April 2025. Upon arrival at Paro International Airport, Bhutanese authorities detained the deportees, conducted brief interviews, and within 24 hours transported them to the Indian border at Phuentsholing, providing them with a small cash stipend and a warning never to return.

These deportations included individuals born in refugee camps in Nepal who had never set foot in Bhutan, as well as those who had lived in Bhutan before their initial expulsion in the 1990s. In all cases, Bhutan refused to recognise them as citizens or to allow them to remain in the country, citing lack of legal status and, in some cases, pressure from the US administration to accept the deportees.

They found themselves stateless, without legal status or protection in India or Nepal, and at risk of detention, exploitation, or further deportation. Several who attempted to enter Nepal were detained by Nepali authorities and faced charges of illegal entry. The Nepalese Supreme Court intervened in April 2025, ordering that deportees not be detained or deported further, but rather accommodated as refugees in camps. However, the lack of legal status, documentation, and prospects for repatriation or integration left these individuals in a state of acute vulnerability. Human rights advocates highlighted the grave legal and ethical implications of such deportations, noting that Bhutan’s refusal to accept returnees—many of whom were born in Bhutan and had no ties elsewhere—violates the right to nationality and the prohibition on arbitrary exile under international law.

The trauma of repeated displacement and the lack of any durable solution manifests the ongoing vulnerability of Bhutan-origin stateless persons. The deportations have sparked concerns among human rights organisations, with advocacy groups calling for urgent intervention to protect the rights of deported Bhutanese refugees. Nepal, which is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, has struggled to address the legal status of these individuals, further complicating their plight. The Bhutanese community in the US has mobilised advocacy efforts to halt further deportations and push for legal protections.

One of these deportees Ashish Subedi had lived in the US since 2016 under a refugee resettlement program. Subedi was detained by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) following a domestic dispute and deported to Bhutan via New Delhi, India.

Upon arrival at Paro International Airport, Bhutanese authorities confiscated his documents, interrogated him, provided food and shelter for one night, and then transported him to Phuentsholing, near the Indian border. From there, he was sent to Panitanki, a town on the India-Nepal border, where Nepalese immigration authorities detained him for illegal entry.

Subedi was not alone in this predicament. Three other deported Bhutanese—Santosh Darjee, Roshan Tamang, and Ashok Gurung—also faced rejection upon their arrival in Bhutan. Bhutanese officials reportedly ordered them to leave the country immediately, threatening them with imprisonment if they refused. With no legal status in Bhutan or Nepal, they were forced to return to refugee camps in Beldangi, Jhapa, where their families had originally lived before resettling abroad.

Freedom of Association and Assembly

Freedom of association and assembly in Bhutan is formally guaranteed by Article 7 of the 2008 Constitution, which provides for the right to..... association. However, these rights are subject to limitations imposed by the government, particularly concerning political activities and civil society organisations (CSOs). The Civil Society Organisations Act of 2007 and its 2022 amendment regulate the formation, registration, and operation of CSOs, with the Civil Society Organisations Authority (CSOA) exercising oversight. The National Security Act of 1992 and the Penal Code contain broad provisions that can be used to restrict assembly and association on grounds of national security or public order. The National Security Act of 1992 prohibits membership in associations deemed harmful to the peace and unity of the country, and the Penal Code criminalises incitement, defamation, and public disorder.

The registration of independent CSOs is tightly controlled, and peaceful protest is effectively banned. The government retains broad discretion to deny or revoke registration, restrict funding, and monitor activities of CSOs.

The CSOA continued to exercise strict control over CSO registration and operations. In 2025, the Authority convened its 44th meeting, issued new guidelines, and de-registered at least two organisations (the Centre for Research on Bhutanese Society and the Bhutan Civil Society Network). The decision to deregister Film Association of Bhutan was challenged at the court, with initial hearing scheduled in early 2026. The dissolution of these organisations occurred

amid stricter financial and operational regulations, such as mandatory endowment funds, which have strained the resources of many civil society groups in Bhutan. No new CSOs were registered in 2025. The administrative burden of registration and renewal, combined with financial sustainability requirements (such as endowment funds), continued to limit the growth and diversity of the sector. The public benefit organisations (PBOs) in the country are required to set up an endowment fund of at least Nu 3 million (USD 34,650) while mutual benefit organisations (MBOs) need to raise Nu 1.5 million (USD 17,320). In addition, CSOs must also submit an operational fund reserve to meet recurrent expenses: Nu 1 million (USD 11,150) for PBOs and half a million (USD 5,770) for MBOs. The availability of these funds becomes one of the criteria for renewing the CSO registration.

The process for registering new CSOs remained opaque and slow, with reports of bureaucratic delays and unclear legal requirements. CSOs advocating for human rights, labor rights, or political reform faced particular scrutiny and difficulty in renewing their registrations.

The space for civil society in Bhutan remained narrow. While the number of registered CSOs has grown since the enactment of the CSO Act in 2007 (30 CSOs remain active as of 2025), their activities are closely monitored, and their ability to advocate on sensitive issues is limited. CSOs play an important role in service delivery, education, health, and environmental protection, but those seeking to address rights, governance, or minority issues face significant barriers. The Bhutan Foundation and other capacity-building initiatives have sought to strengthen CSO organisational capacity, but the sector remains heavily dependent on government goodwill and international support.

The government maintained a ban on public rallies and demonstrations, including rallies by political parties during election campaigns. No major protests or public assemblies were reported in 2025, reflecting both legal constraints and a climate of self-censorship and risk aversion. The RBP is responsible for maintaining public order and enforcing restrictions on assembly. Prior permission was required for public gatherings, and assemblies near government buildings or military installations were prohibited.

No major incidents of police violence or mass arrests were reported in 2025. However, the absence of protest activity itself is an indicative of the restrictive environment and the risks associated with dissent. RBP's public messaging emphasises safety, order, and service, but there is little transparency regarding the handling of political or rights-based gatherings.

During UPR, international community called for the removal of barriers to peaceful assembly, reform of media laws, and expansion of civic space. The government accepted some recommendations related to economic and social rights, but rejected or deflected those concerning civil and political rights, ethnic minorities, and independent oversight. The National Assembly and National Council discussed the need for improved public participation in legislative processes, but practical implementation remains limited.

Trade unions remained effectively non-existent, and labour rights were unprotected. The sharp rise in youth outmigration was attributed in part to the lack of collective bargaining and limited opportunities for civic engagement.

The legal framework for labour unions and collective bargaining remains weak. There are no formal labour unions in Bhutan and attempts to organise are met with bureaucratic obstacles and the threat of legal consequences.

Freedom of Religions

The Constitution of Bhutan (Article 7, Section 4) guarantees the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, and prohibits coercion or inducement to convert from one faith to another. However, the Constitution also designates Mahayana Buddhism as the nation's 'spiritual heritage' and mandates all religious institutions to promote this heritage. The Religious Organisations Act of 2007 regulates the registration and activities of religious groups, but in practice, only Buddhist (and some Hindu) organisations have received official recognition.

The Penal Code (Section 463A) criminalises conversion by means of 'coercion or other forms of inducement,' punishable by up to three years in prison. The terms 'coercion' and 'inducement' are not clearly defined, granting authorities broad discretion to investigate and prosecute alleged proselytism.

The most prominent religious freedom case in 2025 was the ongoing legal dispute involving Rajen Tamang and the local authority. Read the *Case 1* in box story.

This incident highlighted the intersection of religious freedom, freedom of assembly, and administrative discretion. It also exposed the challenges faced by minority religious groups in securing recognition, protection, and equal treatment under the law.

Case 1

An incident related to freedom of assembly in 2025 was the ongoing dispute in Dampbu, Tsirang district, involving building owner Rajen Tamang. Tamang had been holding weekly religious gatherings in the basement of his building, which the local administration deemed unauthorised. In October 2024, the local authority cut off water and electricity to the entire building, citing violations of municipal regulations and unauthorised use of the premises for gatherings.

The case escalated in 2025, with Tsirang's Chief District Officer (CDO) issuing final warnings, the police being dispatched to disperse gatherings, and the eventual revocation of Tamang's event management license by the Regional Office of Industry, Commerce, and Employment in July. On July 6, police officers, acting on the CDO's orders, entered the premises and ordered the gathering to disperse. Tamang's wife was called to the police station and warned that further gatherings would result in arrests.

The District Court, in May, had ruled in Tamang's favour when the utilities disconnection was challenged in the court. Tamang contested the allegations, arguing that his event management business license permitted a range of activities, including conventions, trade shows, and social gatherings. He cited a May 2025 Tsirang District Court judgment, which found no evidence of non-compliance with the occupancy certificate and ordered the restoration of water and electricity to the building, which had been cut off in late 2024 amid the dispute. The High Court had, in 2024, dismissed Tamang's appeal that religious gatherings should be allowed under freedom of religion guaranteed by the constitution.

Despite the court's ruling to allow Tamng to allow to run the business, the CDO continued to restrict gatherings claiming that he was not hosting social gatherings but the religious congregations. Tamang filed a constitutional case in the High Court, asserting his right to freedom of religion under Article 7(4) of the Constitution. As of December 2025, the High Court had not yet issued a final decision on the case.

Christians, who constitute an estimated 2.4% of Bhutan's population (approximately 18,800 individuals, unofficial estimation), continued to face significant barriers to the free practice of their faith in 2025. No Christian churches or organisations received official registration, and all Christian worship remained technically illegal. Converts from Buddhism or Hinduism were subject to social ostracism, family pressure, and, in some cases, threats of expulsion from census records or denial of no-objection certificates (NOCs), which are required for employment, property registration, and access to public services.

Christian gatherings were monitored by local authorities, and any perceived proselytism risked investigation or prosecution under the anti-conversion provisions of the Penal Code. Baptisms and other religious rites were conducted in secret, and Christian funerals were often prevented or disrupted, forcing families to seek burial in neighboring India.

Hindu communities, predominantly among the Lhotshampa population, continued to practice their faith with relative freedom, but remained marginalised in terms of access to public resources. Hindu holidays were recognised as public holidays, for those who celebrate. There are no records of presence of any other religious groups in the country in 2025.

Discrimination and Abuses in Society

Women and Girls

A ADB research shows 44.6% of the Bhutanese women faced one or more form of violence and 30% of the women faced intimate partner violence in 2025. More than half of women and girls believe that violence against women is justified. The 2023 National Health Survey found that 47.5% of women aged 55–59 and 46.8% of those aged 60–64 believed violence could be justified, with higher acceptance rates among women in rural areas and those with lower education levels. This indicates the need for education on gender equality.

Gender-based violence (GBV) remained a significant concern in 2025, with 358 domestic violence cases reported by June and a projected annual total exceeding 430, up from 415 in 2023 and nearly 430 in 2024. The increase in reported cases is attributed to improved awareness and reporting mechanisms, rather than a surge in actual violence. RENEW recorded 788 cases of gender-based abuse and violence in 2023, with emotional abuse being the most prevalent, followed by physical, economic, and sexual abuse. In 2024, sexual abuse cases rose significantly, and for the first time, RENEW recorded walk-in cases from LGBTQIA+ community members and persons with disabilities.

The 13th FYP set a target to reduce the prevalence of violence against women and girls from 44% to 42% by 2029. The National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) and the PEMA Secretariat coordinated GBV prevention and response, with over Nu 6.5 million allocated annually for case management, reintegration, and rehabilitation services.

The Domestic Violence Prevention Act (2013) and the Penal Code of Bhutan provided legal protections for victims, but there is gaps in implementation and enforcement. Survivors often faced social stigma, lack of institutional support, and difficulties in accessing justice.

In 2025, Bhutan launched its first National Strategy and Framework of Action on Elimination of GBV, providing a roadmap for coordinated and sustained action. The government also increased support for civil society organisations managing

shelter homes for women and children, raising funding from Nu 1 million to Nu 3 million annually.

The National Action Plan to Promote Gender Equality in Public Administration (2024–2029), developed by the NCWC with support from UNDP and UN DESA, set targets to increase women’s representation in the civil service to 45% and in decision-making roles to 30% by 2029. The plan focused on three strategic areas: institutional and policy framework, human resource policies and practices, and evidence-based analysis.

Key strategies included revising the National Gender Equality Policy (NGEP), strengthening the capacity of Gender Focal Points, implementing gender-responsive recruitment and training, and enhancing data collection and monitoring systems. The plan also emphasised work-life balance measures, such as workplace childcare facilities and flexible work arrangements.

Despite progress, challenges remain in the legal framework. The Penal Code (Amendment) Bill of 2025 failed to pass due to deadlock over child rape provisions, highlighting ongoing debates about the severity of punishment and the protection of minors.

The government, in partnership with civil society and international organisations, implemented capacity-building initiatives for aspiring women leaders, including the hosting of the Asian Women Parliamentarians’ Caucus and the South Asian Women’s Conference in 2025. These forums were aimed at fostering regional collaboration and strengthening women’s leadership across the region.

Bhutan labour market has gender disparities in the private sector. Women constituted only 42% of the workforce and faced a mean monthly pay gap of 15.6%. Structural segregation channeled women into lower-paying sectors, while men dominated higher-paying fields. Women were underrepresented in STEM fields and overrepresented in informal, insecure work.

The Global Gender Gap Index ranked Bhutan 103rd out of 146 countries, with political empowerment being the weakest dimension. Women were underrepresented in senior management positions, and gender disparities in employment opportunities and wage distribution remained significant.

The overall unemployment rate fluctuated between 3.5% and 10% across the year, with youth unemployment remaining around 19%.

While the overall employment situation remained stable, the high youth unemployment rate continued to drive out-migration, particularly among educated young people seeking better opportunities abroad. As of December 2025, an estimated 66,000 Bhutanese were residing in 111 countries.

The Department of Labour conducted 2,903 inspections nationwide in FY2024–2025, with a strong focus on high-risk sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and hydropower. Routine inspections accounted for 91% of all visits, and 439 enforcement actions were issued for violations related to occupational safety, documentation, and non-compliance with internal service rules. The construction sector, in particular, was identified as the most non-compliant, accounting for 81.4% of all penalties collected.

A total of 223 labour disputes were handled, with wage-related cases dominating at 77.6%. The majority of disputes were concentrated in Thimphu, reflecting the capital's status as the main employment hub.

Bhutan's national minimum wage remained at Nu 215 per day (Nu 6,450 per month), a figure that is below global benchmarks. The stark disparity between Bhutan's minimum wage and international standards fueled debates on wage-setting frameworks and economic equity. Policymakers and commentators pointed to Australia's transparent wage-setting model, which incorporates cost of living, inflation, and social protections, as a potential reference for Bhutan's future reforms.

Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights

The national minimum wage in 2025 was Nu. 450 per day, translating to a monthly minimum of Nu. 11,700 based on 26 working days. This rate applied to all workers, including foreign labourers, and was above the official poverty line.

Public sector salaries remained stable and included various allowances, while private sector wages were more variable and often lower, especially in feminised sectors such as accommodation and retail.

The mean monthly labour income for employed persons was Nu. 25,720 in Quarter 4 of 2025, with males earning an average of Nu. 28,361—Nu. 7,702 higher

than females (Nu. 20,659). The median income was Nu. 20,000, indicating that a significant portion of workers earned near the minimum wage, particularly in agriculture and informal services.

The Gini coefficient, a measure of income inequality, was targeted to be reduced below 0.28 by 2029, but disparities remain, especially between urban and rural areas and among different social groups. Women, ethnic minorities, and persons with disabilities continued to face barriers to full economic participation, including wage gaps, limited access to formal employment, and discrimination in hiring and promotion.

Bhutan's social protection system remained fragmented, with limited coverage for informal workers and vulnerable groups. The 13th FYP aimed at establishing a comprehensive social protection framework by 2029, integrating pension schemes, rural life insurance, and targeted benefits for the disadvantaged groups. However, the absence of a universal social protection policy continued to leave many without adequate support.

Nepali-language education continued to be prohibited in schools, depriving the Lhotshampa community of cultural expression and contributing to systemic discrimination. Ethnic minorities continued to face systemic discrimination, including barriers to citizenship, limited access to education and employment, and exclusion from cultural participation. Statelessness remained a pressing issue, with thousands denied citizenship and associated rights.

Religious minorities faced restrictions on public worship, property ownership, and the registration of religious organisations. Their cultural rights are not protected.

Child Rights

The NCWC and the PEMA Secretariat serve as the primary agencies for child protection and welfare, with the latter expanding its mandate in 2025 to include rapid response and holistic mental health services for children.

The PEMA Secretariat, established in 2023, further consolidated its role in 2025 as Bhutan's national agency for mental health and child protection. By October 2025, the Secretariat had handled nearly 1,900 cases, with almost 59% involving children. The rapid response system ensures that severe cases are addressed within five

hours and all others within 24 hours. The Secretariat's 24/7 helpline (1098), email, and online chat services, along with a network of 12 protection officers, have enabled timely intervention across the country.

Children in conflict with the law accounted for a sizeable proportion of cases managed by the PEMA Secretariat in 2025. The most common offenses were battery, burglary, and drug use. The Secretariat's approach stressed diversion, rehabilitation, and family reintegration, with legal aid provided for criminal cases involving minors. According to RBP, 106 such cases were registered by June. The majority of these cases were related to narcotics and substance abuse, with 40 cases handled by the Narcotic Drugs and Other Vices Division, and notable concentrations in Gelephu (15) and Thimphu (21), followed by Samtse, Paro, and Chhukha.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2024, implemented in 2025, aimed to address rural-urban disparities by consolidating schools into central clusters offering integrated services from Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) to Grade XII. However, concerns regarding the deepening of inequalities between central and non-central schools have not been properly addressed, as the latter continued to rely on district and village-block funding, leading to disparities in learning opportunities for children. The revival efforts were met with mixed reactions, with some stakeholders fearing further marginalisation of non-central school students.

High dropout and repetition rates, especially among children in monastic or boarding schools, continue. Economic hardship, lack of transportation, and family responsibilities remained primary reasons for early school leaving. The ECCD enrollment remained low at 38.14% in 2025, and only 39 schools offered Special Education Needs programs, far short of the target of 120 by 2029. Bhutan had aimed for 50% ECCD enrolment by 2025 and 100% by 2030.

While Bhutan's laws prohibit child labour, enforcement remained inconsistent. Children in rural areas continued to be engaged in agricultural work, sometimes at the expense of their education. The government pledged to strengthen monitoring mechanisms, but gaps persisted in identifying and addressing violations.

Domestic violence involving children also saw an uptick in 2025, with 358 cases reported nationwide by June. North Thimphu and Phuentsholing recorded the highest numbers (47 each), followed by South Thimphu (40), Central Thimphu and Gelephu (35 each), and Wangdue (23). RBP attributes this increase not to a surge in violence per se, but to improved reporting mechanisms and greater public willingness to report abuse, a result of ongoing awareness campaigns.

Sexual violence against children, including molestation and attempted rape, continued to be reported, with most perpetrators known to the victims—often family members or neighbors. The trauma experienced by survivors was compounded by social stigma, lack of family support, and difficulties in securing legal redress. The legal system's reliance on medical or physical evidence, rather than child testimony, often resulted in perpetrators evading prosecution.

Minorities

The Lhotshampas continued to face systemic discrimination and statelessness. Decades after mass expulsions in the 1990s, thousands remained stateless inside Bhutan, denied citizenship, land ownership, voting rights, access to education, and public employment.

The GMC project further displaced Lhotshampa families. The project was announced without public consultation or land restitution, symbolising the rewriting of historical injustices through exclusionary development.

Bhutan decriminalised same-sex relationships in 2021, marking a significant step forward. However, 2025 saw limited progress in legal protections and social acceptance for LGBT individuals. Discrimination noted in employment, healthcare, education, and legal recognition, with no comprehensive anti-discrimination laws in place.

Members of Pride Bhutan, the country's pioneering LGBT community-based organisation, reported that stigma and lack of family acceptance remained the most prevalent causes of suicide among LGBT youth. Bullying, both in schools and communities, was a significant risk factor, and many LGBT individuals led discreet lives due to fear of discrimination.

Pride Bhutan's efforts to secure Civil Society Organisation (CSO) status remained unsuccessful, limiting its ability to access funding and expand support services.

Employment and Workers' Rights

The Trade Union Act of 2006 provides for the formation and operation of trade unions and the right to collective bargaining. However, as of the end of 2025, no trade unions had been registered or recognised in Bhutan, and there were no reports of legal strikes or collective bargaining agreements in force. The law prohibits anti-union discrimination and mandates reinstatement for workers dismissed for union activity, but the absence of unions renders these provisions largely theoretical.

The ILO and OECD have repeatedly highlighted the importance of collective bargaining for reducing inequality and improving labour protections, but Bhutan's system remains highly centralised and state-driven, with limited space for independent workers organisation.

While the legal framework allows for unionisation, practical barriers—including regulatory hurdles, lack of awareness, and a culture of deference to authority—have stymied the development of independent labour organisations.

In 2025, Bhutan's working-age population (15 years and above) was estimated at 604,680, with 65.3% active in the labour force. The labor force participation rate (LFPR) showed modest recovery from pandemic-era lows, stabilising at 64.6%. However, gender and urban-rural disparities remained evident: male LFPR stood at 72.7%, while female LFPR lagged at 55.8%. Rural participation (67.7%) continued to outpace urban areas (59.3%), reflecting the enduring importance of agriculture and rural livelihoods.

Of the 390,856 employed persons, 46.3% were engaged in agriculture, 40.9% in services, and 12.7% in industry. The dominance of agriculture persisted, particularly among women (over 54% of employed females), while men were more evenly distributed across services (45.4%), agriculture (35.9%), and industry (18.7%).

The national unemployment rate fluctuated between 2.9% and 3.8% across 2025. Urban unemployment remained significantly higher (7.5%) than rural (2.0%), reflecting ongoing challenges in urban job creation and skills mismatch. Female unemployment (5.0%) consistently exceeded male unemployment (3.1%), a gap that widened among youth and educated cohorts.

Youth unemployment was a persistent concern, peaking at 20.6%. Urban youth faced even higher rates (over 22%), with young women disproportionately affected (26.5%). The majority of unemployed youth cited recently completed studies, lack of adequate qualifications, and experience as primary barriers to employment, pointing to ongoing education-to-work transition challenges.

Long-term unemployment also emerged as a concern: 26.6% of unemployed persons had been seeking work for more than a year, indicating structural barriers to labour market entry for certain groups.

The labour market remained tight, with 12,871 jobseekers registered in the Bhutan Labour Market Information System (BLMIS) from July 2024 to June 2025, but only 5,939 vacancies posted and 2,764 actual placements. The application and adequacy ratios hovered around 0.5, indicating that only half of jobseekers were matched to available vacancies. Skills mismatch, limited private sector absorption, and a preference for public sector jobs among educated youth contributed to persistent unemployment and underemployment.

A total of over 200 labour complaints were recorded, spanning wage disputes, wrongful termination, occupational injuries, and unsafe conditions. Wage-related complaints (non-payment, under-payment, delayed payment) accounted for 25.5% of anonymous reports, while working-hours, overtime, and leave violations comprised 23.5%. Statutory benefits, contract disputes, and harassment or discrimination were also reported, though the prevalence of formal complaints likely understates the true scale of violations, especially in the informal sector. The Department of Labour introduced Alternative Dispute Resolution training for labour officers in 2025, aiming to expedite and amicably resolve workplace disputes.

The Department of Labour launched the National Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Strategy 2025–2035, aiming for 90% OHS compliance by 2035 and a 10–15% reduction in workplace accidents over the first five years. In 2025, 89 enterprises were evaluated for OHS compliance, with an average score of 63.2%. Manufacturing, construction, and mining sectors led in compliance, while the service sector lagged significantly (average score: 50%).

Fifteen workplace accidents were officially recorded (4 fatal, 11 injuries), with construction and manufacturing accounting for the majority. However, underreporting remains a challenge, and actual incidents are likely higher. Key gaps included inadequate PPE, lack of certified safety officers, insufficient training, and poor living conditions for foreign workers.

Bhutan's labour market remained heavily dependent on foreign labour in 2025, particularly in construction, manufacturing, and hydropower. Over 151,646 foreign workers were approved during the year, with 94,691 in construction, 22,169 in manufacturing, and 17,149 in public administration and defence. The majority were Indian nationals, employed as masons, concrete workers, carpenters, and other skilled or semi-skilled trades.

The out-migration of educated and skilled Bhutanese accelerated in 2025, driven by limited domestic opportunities and higher wages abroad, especially in Australia, the United States, and the Middle East.

Child labour remained a concern, particularly in informal sectors and domestic work. The government reported one child labour violation in 2025 and maintained SOPs for victim identification and referral. The NCWC operated a toll-free helpline and provided counselling, legal aid, and alternative care for children in need. Efforts to eliminate child marriage and harmful practices continued, though data gaps persisted.

The informal economy accounted for a significant share of employment, especially in agriculture, retail, and services. Informal workers often lacked written contracts, social protection, and access to dispute resolution. The rise of gig and platform work, while still nascent, introduced new challenges for labour regulation and worker protections.

Crimes

The RBP's annual crime statistics for 2025 indicated that overall crime rates rose modestly compared to 2024. Property crimes are increasing and drug-related offenses continued to increase, particularly among youth, while cybercrime emerged as a growing concern. Violent crimes such as assault and domestic violence persisted, though homicide rates remained relatively low.

Bhutan recorded 2,462 general crime cases, showing a continued decline over the past four years. However, several serious categories of offences rose sharply. Motor vehicle accidents increased to 1,450 cases, resulting in 102 deaths and 784 injuries, marking a significant rise compared to earlier years. Drug-related offences also remained high, with 1,750 cases reported in 2025, even though this figure was slightly lower than the peak in 2023. The RBP reported increased seizures of cannabis, methamphetamine, and pharmaceutical drugs. Youth involvement in drug abuse and trafficking was a major concern. Schools and colleges reported cases of students caught with controlled substances. Phuentsholing remained a hotspot for cross-border trafficking. Several cases involved smuggling drugs from India into Bhutan.

Sexual offences continued to rise as well, reaching 152 cases during the year. Bhutan also recorded 104 suicide cases in 2025, reflecting ongoing concerns about mental health and social pressures. Cybercrime showed a notable increase, particularly in OTP-sharing scams, which rose to 29 cases, up from 9 the previous year. Online scams, identity theft, and digital fraud targeted youth and small businesses. Business Bhutan highlighted the need for stronger cyber laws and digital literacy programs.

Kuensel reported several high-profile thefts in Thimphu, including cases linked to unemployed youth and substance abuse. Robbery remained relatively stable. Most incidents involved small-scale robberies targeting shops and individuals in urban areas. Vandalism cases declined. Alcohol abuse was often cited as a contributing factor.

Many assault incidents were linked to alcohol consumption and disputes in urban areas. Homicide remained relatively rare, with 12 cases reported. Most were domestic disputes or alcohol-related altercations.

Domestic violence continued to be an issue. The NCWC documented multiple interventions, including counselling and shelter services for victims.

White-collar crimes such as fraud and corruption were reported in 2025, with the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) investigating 45 cases. Fraud cases involved embezzlement, misuse of public funds, and bribery. ACC emphasised transparency and accountability in government institutions.

GMC and Internal Displacements

The Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) project, announced as a transformative vision for Bhutan's future, has been promoted as a model of sustainable urbanisation. It is designed to integrate mindfulness, cultural preservation, and economic innovation, positioning Bhutan as a global hub for wellness and sustainable development. By 2025, the project had advanced significantly, with the construction of Bhutan's second international airport.

The government emphasised the benefits of GMC, framing it as a national priority. Officials highlighted the potential for economic growth, international recognition, and cultural preservation.

The process to translate this vision into reality during 2025 revealed tensions between national development goals and local rights. The project required significant land acquisition, leading to the displacement of families from ancestral homes. Compensation packages were criticised as inadequate, and many locals felt excluded from the economic opportunities promised by the project.

One of the most significant grievances reported in 2025 was the lack of opportunity for local residents in Sarpang district, in which the city is being built. Despite promises of economic benefits, many locals found themselves excluded from the new economy emerging in Gelephu. Employment opportunities in construction, planning, and administration often required skills that displaced farmers and villagers did not possess.

Business Bhutan noted that the emerging 'mindful economy' favoured investors and external entrepreneurs rather than local residents. Wellness centres and tech parks attracted international interest, but locals struggled to access meaningful employment. This mismatch created frustration, as communities felt sidelined in a project that was built on their land.

The exclusion of locals from economic opportunities raises rights concerns. The right to livelihood is a fundamental human right, and development projects must ensure that affected communities have access to employment and income. In Gelephu, the failure to provide adequate training and support for locals undermined this right.

The removal of people from ancestral homes was the most contentious issue. Families reported being pressured to vacate land designated for development, often under the justification of ‘national development needs.’

Kuensel documented cases where families were relocated without adequate consultation, raising concerns about transparency and accountability. The families highlighted the cultural loss experienced from displacement, noting that ancestral land carries not only economic value but also spiritual significance.

The removal of families from ancestral homes disrupts community cohesion and erodes traditional practices. It undermines the right to housing, the right to cultural participation, and the right to fair treatment. Displacement without adequate compensation or consultation constitutes a violation of human rights, particularly when it is carried out under the guise of development.

Because land and housing transactions in Sarpang district are banned currently, displaced families had to seek new land in other districts. As a result, many migrated to Tsirang and Dagana, seeking affordable housing and livelihood opportunities. Families not only lost their land but also faced the challenge of integrating into new communities. Daily Bhutan reported on families who struggled to access services in their new districts, highlighting the difficulties of forced migration.

The government failed to abide its obligation for citizens’ right to housing, right to livelihood, right to cultural participation and right to fair treatment. Compensation packages were offered to displaced families, but many argued that they did not reflect the true value of ancestral land. Women and children were particularly vulnerable. The NCWC documented cases where displaced families required special support to ensure children’s access to education and healthcare. Women faced heightened risks of exploitation and insecurity in informal settlements.

Urban migration created pressures on housing, employment and services in Gelephu and other districts. Rising demand for affordable housing led to the expansion of informal settlements, raising concerns about sanitation and public health.

Flash floods and landslides are other drivers of internal displacement. The monsoon season in 2025 had erratic rainfall, with heavy downpours triggering landslides in eastern Bhutan and flash floods in southern districts such as Sarpang

and Samtse. Kuensel documented several incidents where families lost homes and farmland, forcing them to relocate to safer areas.

Agricultural collapse also contributes to displacement. Erratic rainfall patterns, soil erosion, and pest infestations have reduced yields, undermining food security. Farmers in rural areas, particularly in the east, reported abandoning traditional livelihoods and migrating to urban centers such as Thimphu and Phuentsholing. Business Bhutan highlighted the economic pressures faced by displaced farmers, noting that migration often results in precarious employment and social dislocation.

Internal displacement leads to rural-to-urban migration. Families displaced by floods or landslides often move to nearby towns or cities, seeking safety and livelihood opportunities. This migration disrupts traditional social networks and cultural practices, as displaced people struggle to adapt to urban life. Media reported on families from Sarpang who relocated to Thimphu after losing farmland to floods, about their challenges in securing housing, employment, and social integration.

House fires, forest fires, and other hazards contributed to localised displacements. There were 39 fire incidents reported in the monitoring period – including house fires and forest fires during fire season.

Accurate data on the number, location, and needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs) remained a challenge in Bhutan.

National Human Rights Institution

Bhutan lacked an independent national human rights institution aligned with the Paris Principles, limiting effective monitoring and accountability on human rights issues. Other human rights institutions are still limited. They exist in parts, but they do not form a full system. We observe this as a major gap and stress that Bhutan needs a single body that can protect rights, investigate complaints, and hold the state accountable.

Bhutan works with the United Nations human rights system. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reviews Bhutan through the Universal Periodic Review. Bhutan also reports to UN treaty bodies. During these reviews, UN experts raise concerns about issues such as arbitrary detention, limits on free expression, and the treatment of political prisoners. UN Special Procedures continued the call for the release of long-term detainees. These concerns show that Bhutan lacks strong internal oversight.

Inside the country, human rights responsibilities are spread across several agencies. The NCWC focuses on women's and children's rights – specially for rescue and rehabilitations. It does not cover broader civil and political rights. The Anti-Corruption Commission investigates corruption. The Election Commission oversees elections. The Bhutan Information Communications and Media Authority regulates media and communications. These bodies appear in Bhutan's reports to the UN, but none of them act as a full human rights institution. They do not have the power to monitor detention centres, review laws for rights impacts, or receive complaints on all types of violations.

Calls for a National Human Rights Commission are growing. We further stress an independent commission would help people bring complaints. It would also monitor prisons and police, review laws, and support Bhutan's work with the UN. It would give the public a trusted place to report abuses. It would also help address long-standing concerns about political prisoners and due process.

Most countries in South Asia already have national human rights institutions. Their quality varies, but they provide a basic structure for rights protection. Bhutan is now one of the few without such a body. Creating a commission would match Bhutan's commitments to good governance and the values of Gross National

Happiness. It would show that the country takes rights seriously and wants stronger accountability.

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