



Bible Access List

Where Bible access is most difficult, and Bible shortage is greatest

Malaysia

Bible Restrictions Rank: **45**
CONSIDERABLE ACCESS RESTRICTIONS

Bible Shortage Rank: **36**
Bible needs estimate between one hundred and two hundred fifty thousand



An Overview of Bible access in Malaysia

Malaysia is a nation where religious freedom is constitutionally recognized but, in practice, is controlled at some level. Christians make up approximately 10% of the population (around 3.45 million people), yet their ability to access and distribute Bibles is considerably restricted. Due to the unique context of these restrictions, less than half of Malaysian believers have access to Scripture.

Malaysia's constitution upholds Islam as the religion of the federation, and laws are increasingly influenced by Sharia courts, especially in Malay-majority states. The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) has gained political power in recent years, pushing for stricter Islamic governance and harsher penalties for religious minorities. At the same time, anti-Christian rhetoric is on the rise, with Christian organizations frequently accused of attempting to convert Muslims. The government has previously restricted Christian materials, and local authorities continue to closely monitor church activities due to fears of proselytization among the Malay Muslim population, significantly restricting Bible access.

For Malay Muslims, who constitute about 55% of the population, accessing a Bible in any form, whether digital or physical, is completely prohibited. Any Malay who is found with a Bible can face severe consequences, both legally and socially. For non-Malay Christians, Bible access is legal but heavily regulated. Bibles must be imported with special permits, and their distribution is carefully monitored. While English and Chinese Bibles are more available, Malay-language Bibles (Alkitab) are especially restricted (32 words are not allowed to be used). For example, it contains the term "Allah" for God—a term that authorities claim should be exclusive to Islam.

A significant factor in Bible access is the divide between West Malaysia (Peninsular Malaysia) and East Malaysia (Sabah & Sarawak on the island of Borneo). In East Malaysia, where a large portion of the Christian population resides, Bible access is comparatively easier. Churches are legally permitted to have Bibles, and restrictions are generally low for Christians in these regions. However, in West Malaysia, where the majority of Malay Muslims live, Bible access is more difficult. Churches operate under tight government scrutiny, and any attempt to distribute Bibles, particularly in Bahasa, faces intense resistance. This is where the most severe restrictions are enforced.

Malaysia does not print Bibles domestically, and importing them is a bureaucratic challenge. The process requires permits that are difficult to obtain, and authorities have been known to confiscate shipments of Bibles at customs. Digital access to Bibles is also monitored, and Christian websites are occasionally blocked or restricted.

Malay Muslim Background believers (MBBs), those who convert to Christianity, face the greatest danger when trying to access Bibles. Conversion out of Islam is illegal in most Malaysian states, and MBBs risk family rejection, societal isolation, legal repercussions, and even detention. In this context, Bible access is highly dangerous, even possessing a digital Bible can result in severe punishment.

Before we continue, would you take a pause to pray for Malaysia?

How can I pray for Malaysia?

- **Pray for Ethnic Malay Christians.** Many of them must hide their faith to avoid persecution. Ask God to provide them with discreet ways to access Bibles while remaining safe from legal consequences.
- **Pray for West Malaysia.** The most severe restrictions exist in this region. Pray that believers will find ways to legally obtain and share Bibles, especially Malay-language Bibles that are crucial for nurturing faith.
- **Pray for MBBs.** They face intense persecution. Pray for their protection, courage, and spiritual growth.
- **Pray for Innovation & Global Partnerships.** The challenge is not just about access but also about wisdom in distribution. Pray for strategic solutions—whether through digital access, creative outreach, or underground networks—so that every Christian in Malaysia can read God's Word.

After praying for Malaysia, continue reading on the next page to learn more.

Bible Access Restrictions

Considerable Access Restrictions

- Import restrictions for part of the population
- Print restrictions for part of the population
- Storage restrictions for part of the population
- Ownership restrictions for part of the population
- Distribution restrictions for part of the population

Other Limiting Factors

Some Other Factors

Bible Shortages Among Believers

- Bible ownership is low, **estimated** Bible need is between 100 and 250 thousand

Main religion: Islam

Country population: 34,672,000

Christian population:

3,449,000, 9.95% of total population

World Watch List: #51

WHAT'S BLOCKING BIBLE ACCESS IN MALAYSIA?

Despite Malaysia's constitutional recognition of religious freedom, significant barriers prevent many Christians, especially **ethnic Malay converts** and those in **West Malaysia**—from accessing the Bible. These restrictions are driven by a combination of legal, social, and political factors that create an environment where obtaining and distributing Bibles can be extremely difficult.

Strict Control Over Bible Imports and Printing

Malaysia does not print Bibles domestically. Instead, all Bibles must be imported, and shipments face heavy government regulation. Any Bible in the Malay language (Alkitab) is particularly scrutinized, requiring government-issued permits, which are difficult to obtain. In multiple past incidents, authorities have seized shipments of Malay-language Bibles at ports, delaying or outright blocking distribution.

While non-Malay Christians in East Malaysia face fewer restrictions, West Malaysian Christians, especially those living among the Muslim majority, encounter strict governmental oversight. Churches are required to report imported Bibles, and official records track where they are sent and distributed.

Prohibition on Distributing Bibles to Muslims

Malaysia's laws explicitly prohibit distributing Christian materials—including Bibles—to ethnic Malays, who are automatically registered as Muslims at birth. Any attempt to share a Bible with a Muslim is considered proselytization, which is illegal and can lead to harsh penalties such as imprisonment, fines, or forced re-education. This law is aggressively enforced, particularly in West Malaysia, where Islamic authorities monitor religious activity closely.

Sharia Law and Apostasy Laws

Malaysia operates under a dual legal system, where Sharia law governs all ethnic Malay Muslims. Any Malay who leaves Islam (MBBs) is subject to Sharia court rulings, which can mandate:

- Rehabilitation programs (where individuals are pressured to return to Islam)
- Legal prosecution
- Forced separation from Christian spouses and children
- Loss of inheritance rights and employment opportunities

These laws not only prevent Malay Muslims from accessing Bibles but also create an environment where even being in possession of a Bible can be dangerous for them.

The “Allah” Controversy and Language Restrictions

One of the most severe barriers to Bible access in Malaysia revolves around the use of the word “Allah” in Malay-language Bibles. The government banned the use of “Allah” in Christian materials, claiming it could “confuse” Muslims. This restriction heavily limits the availability of Malay Bibles, leaving many indigenous Christians (especially in Sabah and Sarawak) without Scripture in their heart language.

Surveillance and Crackdowns on Christian Communities

Authorities, especially in West Malaysia, monitor Christian communities to ensure that Bibles are not being shared with Muslims. Churches face raids, and individuals caught with materials in Malay can face interrogation, fines, or worse. Surveillance is particularly strong in highly Islamic states, where Christian gatherings are closely watched.

Conversion Stigma and Family Rejection

For ethnic Malay Christians, the challenge is not just legal but deeply personal. MBBs face family rejection, societal ostracization, and even physical violence. Some are forcibly placed in Islamic “rehabilitation centers,” where they are pressured to recant their faith. Because of these risks, many MBBs do not keep physical copies of the Bible, fearing that their families or local authorities might discover them.

Widespread Poverty in Rural Areas

Although Malaysia is considered an upper-middle-income nation, large portions of the Christian population in East Malaysia live in poverty. Many believers, particularly in rural Sabah and Sarawak, simply cannot afford to purchase a Bible. Even when Bibles are available, they are often too expensive for those living in low-income communities.

Geographic Challenges in East Malaysia

Even in Sabah and Sarawak, where Christian communities are larger, geographic isolation creates additional barriers. Many believers in remote villages have no direct access to bookstores or churches that distribute Bibles. Poor infrastructure, especially in rural indigenous areas, means that many do not have internet access, limiting their ability to download digital Bibles as an alternative.

Unmasking the Forces That Restrict Bible Access in Malaysia

Malaysia	Islamic Oppression	Religious Nationalism	Ethno-religious hostility	Clan oppression	Christian denominational oppression	Communist and post-Communist oppression	Secular intolerance	Dictatorial paranoia	Organized corruption and crime	Reference
Persecution Engines →										<p>The more fully shaded the circle in orange, the stronger the level of persecution. The number of "+" signs indicates the frequency or intensity of the driving factors behind it.</p>
Persecution Drivers ↓	Very strong	Not at all	Medium	Very weak	Not at all	Not at all	Not at all	Strong	Not at all	
Government officials	++++		++++					++++		
Ethnic group leaders	++++		+++					++		
Non-Christian religious leaders	++++		+++							
Christian religious leaders										
Violent religious groups										
Normal citizens										
Extended family	++++		++++							
Political parties	++++		++++					++++		
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups										
Organized crime										
Multilateral org. & Embassies										

Malaysia’s legal, political, and social structures create a hostile environment for Bible access, especially for MBBs and Malay Muslims. The primary forces restricting access to Bibles in Malaysia are driven by a combination **Islamic oppression, dictatorial paranoia, and ethno-religious hostility**. And these are usually enforced by government officials, ethnic group leaders, non-Christian religious leaders, extended family, and political parties.

The World Watch List sheds light on the broader context of persecution of Christians. But now we have to ask the question: How does this affect Bible access? Furthermore, where can we pinpoint the problem so we can address the need and demand for Bibles in Malaysia?

A CLOSER LOOK AT PERSECUTION ENGINES

A persecution engine is simply this: the source of persecution in the country. A persecution driver (or actor) is the one “driving” the persecution. Taking a closer look at these engines and drivers, in proper context, will give us insight on how we can solve the problems of Bible access in the country.



A System of Control and Fear

Islamic oppression stands out as the primary force restricting Bible access in Malaysia. The Malaysian constitution explicitly defines "Malay" as synonymous with "Muslim," which creates both legal and societal pressures preventing ethnic Malays from accessing Christian resources, including the Bible.

- **Sharia Law Enforcement:** In 2021, Kelantan amended its Sharia Criminal Code, making proselytization and apostasy punishable offenses. Such laws directly target Malay Muslims who convert to Christianity, severely restricting their ability to openly possess or read the Bible.

- **Restrictions on Malay-language Bibles (Alkitab):** The Malaysian government tightly restricts Malay-language Bibles primarily due to the inclusion of the word "Allah." Authorities argue that allowing non-Muslims to use this term may encourage proselytization among Muslims. This issue has resulted in multiple incidents of Bible confiscations and legal controversies, significantly limiting the distribution and accessibility of Malay-language Bibles.
- **Targeting Muslim Background believers (MBBs):** They are particularly vulnerable. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is considered apostasy, punishable under Sharia law in many states. MBBs frequently experience harassment, threats, and intimidation, not only from authorities but also from their families and communities, forcing them to practice their faith in secret.

The rise of the Islamist political party, PAS (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party), has further emboldened extremist sentiments. For example, in August 2020, a PAS member of parliament publicly called the Bible a "distorted book" and refused to retract or apologize for his statement, intensifying societal hostility towards Christianity.



The State's Fear of Religious Shifts

Dictatorial paranoia describes Malaysia's political climate, characterized by the government's fear of losing control over the religious status quo. Authorities closely monitor and control religious activities, particularly when they involve Christian interactions with Muslims.

- **State Surveillance of Christian Activities:** The Malaysian government conducts surveillance on Christian organizations and churches suspected of proselytizing Muslims. Authorities have periodically raided churches, bookstores, and Christian gatherings suspected of containing or distributing materials aimed at Muslims, contributing to a climate of fear among Christians who wish to share or access Bibles openly.
- **Political Use of Religion:** Politicians often weaponize religion for political gain. For example, in 2023, Christian Minister of Youth and Sports Hannah Yeoh was falsely accused by PAS politicians of using a government-sponsored program to convert Muslim youths to Christianity. Such politically motivated accusations escalate anti-Christian sentiment and restrict believers' ability to access and openly share Scripture.



Deepening Societal Divisions

Ethno-religious hostility is deeply ingrained in Malaysia's social fabric, reflected in tensions primarily between Malay Muslims and ethnic minority groups, including Chinese and Indian Christians.

- **Public Demonstrations and Hostility:** Ethnic and religious tensions have repeatedly surfaced publicly, such as the massive 2018 demonstration organized by Malay-Muslim parties (UMNO and PAS) to oppose Malaysia joining the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). Demonstrations like this reinforce Malay-Muslim dominance, indirectly impacting Bible access by increasing societal pressures against religious minorities.

- **Anti-Christian Rhetoric:** Hostility towards Christianity is explicitly evident through government-affiliated publications. For instance, in 2021, an e-book titled "Exposing the Christian Agenda," originally published by the Selangor Islamic Religious Council, labeled Christians as "enemies of Islam" and accused them of having hidden missionary objectives. This propaganda significantly amplifies societal hostility, making Bible access even more sensitive and dangerous.
- **Challenges for Bumiputra Christians:** Although Bumiputra (indigenous people) are constitutionally entitled to affirmative action benefits, these privileges are often revoked once individuals convert to Christianity. Such actions reflect broader societal discrimination that restricts Bible access and the freedom to practice Christianity openly among indigenous believers.

THE URGENT NEED FOR BIBLES IN MALAYSIA

Despite constitutional protections for religious freedom, the reality for Malaysian Christians is that Bible access remains a significant challenge—not just for MBBs, but even for long-standing believers. Research estimates show that less than 50% of Christians in Malaysia own a Bible.

To meet the spiritual needs of the Christian population, between **100,000 and 250,000 Bibles** are urgently needed to ensure both believers and seekers have access to God's Word.

A Growing Church, A Growing Demand

Christianity in Malaysia is growing despite mounting pressures and persecution. Over the past five years, the Church expanded, adding thousands of new believers to the body of Christ. But with this growth comes an urgent need. A church that is growing without access to Scripture is a church at risk, making it critical that new believers receive Bibles to strengthen their faith and deepen their understanding of God's Word.

Bible Formats for Diverse Needs

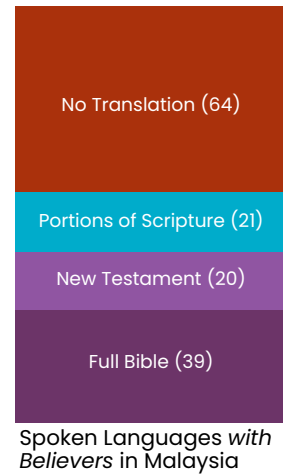
Given Malaysia's technological landscape, the most effective means of distributing Scripture is through digital formats. Whether in the form of Bible apps, online platforms, or video content—are the top priority for reaching Malaysian Christians.

The Translation Gap

The linguistic diversity of Malaysian Christians further underscores the challenge. With at least 144 languages spoken by believers, ensuring Bible access in the right language and format is critical.

- **39** languages have a complete Bible.
- **20** only have the New Testament.
- **21** have just portions of Scripture translated.
- **64** languages remain without any Scripture translation

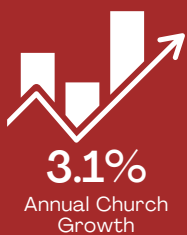
For many believers, a Bible in their heart language remains distant. Urgent efforts in Bible translation and distribution must be made to ensure no community is left without access to God's Word.



A CLARION CALL TO THE GLOBAL CHURCH

The need for Bibles in Malaysia is more than a logistical challenge, it's a mission priority for the Body of Christ across the globe. Tens of thousands of Christians hunger for the Word of God, and seekers are searching for truth. The church is growing, but many remain without access to Bibles, new believers are left vulnerable, unable to fully root their faith in Scripture. The time to act is now. Every Bible placed in the hands of a believer in Malaysia is a lifeline, a source of strength, and a beacon of hope in an environment where faith comes with a cost.

The global Church has an opportunity and a responsibility to respond. Through Bible translation, digital innovation, and strategic partnerships, we can ensure that every Christian in Malaysia has access to the life-changing power of God's Word. The challenge is great, but the impact of meeting this need is eternal. Will we rise to the call?



The Bible Access List (BAL) and the Country Profile utilizes data from various primary and secondary sources. Key resources include the survey data, World Christian Database, Open Doors' World Watch List files, World Bank development indicators, and Bible translation data from multiple organizations. For a complete list of data sources and links, please refer to the BAL Methodology available at Bibleaccesslist.org.