

# **MONGOLIA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The national constitution, laws, and official policies specifically provide for the protection of religious freedom, but, in practice, the government imposed numerous restrictions that affected members of minority religious groups. The government selectively enforced legal and policy protections of religious freedom. Respect for and protection of religious freedom continued to vary among the provinces. The law limits proselytizing. Some religious groups, particularly foreign-run religious groups, faced bureaucratic harassment from local governments or were denied registration. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, including pressure on persons who converted to Christianity. A number of observers reported that the growing influence of Christian groups worried some citizens, who considered Christianity to be a "foreign" religion that could erode respect for the country's culture. In some cases, this fear led to harassment of Christians. Muslim institutions generally fared better as a result of their deeper historical roots in society.

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom with government officials at the local, provincial, and national levels, including meetings with high-level officials in the Ministry of Justice, parliamentarians, and provincial political leaders. Embassy officials also met frequently with religious leaders across the country and invited Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim leaders to embassy events.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

According to the 2011 Mongolian Statistical Yearbook, the population is slightly more than 2.8 million. Buddhism remains closely linked with the country's cultural traditions, with 53 percent of citizens self-identifying as Buddhist according to government statistics. Local scholars estimate that more than 90 percent of the population subscribes to Buddhism, although practice varies widely. Lamaist Buddhism of the Tibetan variety is the traditional and dominant religion.

Muslims constitute approximately 5 percent of the population nationwide and 80 percent of the population of the primarily ethnic Kazakh western province of Bayan-Olgii. According to the Mongolian Muslim Association, in addition to

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approximately 120,000 Kazakh Muslims (mostly in Bayan-Olgii), there are 30,000 Khoton Muslims residing primarily in the province of Uvs. There are more than 40 mosques and ten Islamic student centers, where an estimated 3,000 students study Islam.

There is a small but growing population of Christians. According to the 2010 National Census, approximately 2 percent of the population is Christian. A 2011 government nationwide study indicates that 4.7 percent of the 2,500 individuals surveyed are Christian.

According to estimates by various Christian groups, approximately 90 percent of Christians are Protestant, while 9 percent belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Roman Catholics and members of the Russian Orthodox Church together account for the remaining 1 percent.

Some citizens practice shamanism, often in tandem with another religion. The 2010 National Census estimates that 2.9 percent of the population practices shamanism, widely viewed as a traditional form of healing. According to the 2011 government survey of 2,500 people, 6 percent of those surveyed self-identified as shamanists and 8.6 percent responded that they practiced shamanism alongside Buddhism.

According to 2011 records from the State General Registration Office, which are the most recent records available, there are 630 registered places of worship, of which 272 are Buddhist, 293 Christian, and 65 belonging to various other religious groups. According to estimates by the Evangelical Alliance, a confederation of evangelical Christian churches throughout the country, there are 400 to 600 evangelical churches, approximately 250 to 300 of which are registered.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom, and the constitution explicitly recognizes the separation of church and state. Although there is no state religion, the law asserts the government shall grant proper respect to Buddhism as the predominant religion of the country for the sake of national unity and the maintenance of cultural and historic traditions.

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Religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must register with local and provincial authorities, as well as the General Authority of State Registration (General Authority), to function legally. Registrations are valid for 12 months, and religious groups must renew their registrations annually with up to six different government institutions across local and national levels. A religious group must provide the following documentation to the General Authority when applying to register: a letter requesting registration; a letter from the city council or other local authority granting approval to conduct religious services; a brief description of the group, its charter, documentation of its founding, a list of leaders, financial information, documentation of ownership of a building, and brief biographic information of the person wishing to conduct religious services; and the expected number of worshippers.

Religious groups are required to pay property taxes and social security. NGOs, including religious groups, are not required to pay income tax. By law all foreign organizations must hire a certain number of nationals for every foreign employee. The mandatory percentage of national employees varies from 60 percent to 95 percent, depending on the industry. The law applies to both religious and secular groups. Foreigners who enter on work visas are not allowed to undertake religious activities during their work hours.

National law limits proselytizing. The law forbids spreading religious views by “force, pressure, material incentives, deception, or means which harm health or morals or are psychologically damaging.” Groups involved in providing child care, welfare, or child protection services may not promote religion or religious customs counter to the child’s “national traditional religion.” The law also prohibits the use of gifts for religious recruitment.

All private religious schools are entitled to state funding for their secular curricula. The government is prohibited by law from giving state funds to religious schools for religious education. This policy applies equally to all religious groups.

A Ministry of Education directive bans religious instruction in public schools. The government may deny the request for an extension of registration of a religious group if the group violates the ban by teaching religion in a public school. The ministry may also recommend that employers fire teachers who teach religion in the classroom.

The government does not observe any religious holidays as national holidays.

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### Government Practices

There were no reports of abuse of religious freedom, although the government imposed numerous restrictions that affected members of minority religious groups. Moreover, the government selectively enforced legal and policy protections of religious freedom. Some religious groups seeking registration faced burdensome bureaucratic requirements and significant delays.

Christian groups and lawyers protecting religious freedom reported that local government authorities threatened those engaging in private religious services with unspecified “legal action.” These groups reported that government authorities had not prosecuted such activities in court, but preferred to use intimidation.

Problems with registration and operation varied significantly across the country, largely dependent upon the policies and practices of local government officials. Registration requirements changed frequently and without public announcement; religious groups reported these practices routinely caused confusion.

The government used the registration and renewal process to assess the applications of religious groups, as well as to supervise and limit the number of places of worship and the number and type of clergy admitted to the country. It also allowed the government to monitor the ratio of foreigners to Mongolian nationals conducting religious activities. Although the General Authority possessed the ultimate authority to approve a group’s application, according to observers, approval was often made difficult by local officials who refused to cooperate with some applicants.

Foreign-run churches in some regions reported that authorities permitted Mongolian-run Christian churches to register every three years rather than every year, depending upon a religious leader’s personal connections with the local government. Nevertheless, both foreign-based and local Christian groups complained that the process for obtaining registration and extensions was arbitrary and that there was no appeal mechanism for denials.

In December the government reportedly began conducting an audit of all religious groups for transparency and compliance with laws. Certain religious groups reported receiving requests for lists of all their employees (including their national registration numbers), congregation meeting information, and bank statements. According to observers, the criminal police claimed to be gathering such information in response to a possible increase in money laundering and human

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trafficking within certain religious groups, as well as a perceived increase in the threat of terrorism and the possibility that religious groups could be used to assist such an attack. Observers stated that the police did not indicate from whom or what this threat of terrorism came.

The Ulaanbaatar City Council granted eight of 51 registration requests from religious groups (five Christian, one Buddhist, and two shamanist) and extended permits for 114 of 134 religious groups requesting renewal in Ulaanbaatar between January 1 and November 26. As of November, there were 81 Buddhist, 146 Christian, 15 shamanist, two Muslim, one Bahai, and one Shinto groups registered.

Local legislative bodies administered a separate local registration process. Officials in Ulaanbaatar reportedly employed an arbitrary means of registering places of worship. The Ulaanbaatar City Council also refused to recognize branch churches as being affiliated with one religion; instead it required each individual church to register as a separate entity. This caused particular problems for Christian denominations seeking to operate multiple churches within Ulaanbaatar, as each branch was obliged to register as a separate religious group. Church groups with multiple branches alleged the Ulaanbaatar authorities preferred this system because it allowed the government to collect greater tax revenue.

Unregistered religious groups were often able to function, although at times the groups encountered opposition from authorities. In certain regions, leaders of unregistered Christian churches reported they did not experience obstacles in conducting religious activities despite their status, but said they were frequently denied permits to meet in public places. Unregistered churches allegedly experienced harassment in the form of frequent visits by local tax officers, police, and other agencies. Registered churches also reported harassment by local authorities who demanded, at times without clear legal justification, that the churches present official documentation and rosters of church members, and, in some cases, pay bribes. Attorneys representing Christian groups reported a significant drop in such harassment during the year. Because secular businesses and other nonreligious groups reported similar treatment, it was not possible to determine whether this treatment was due to the religious affiliation of a given group.

Approximately 60 percent of the approximately 400 churches belonging to the Evangelical Alliance were registered. Unregistered churches were unable to obtain registration from local authorities. The Evangelical Alliance and lawyers representing Christian groups reported that most unregistered churches were in

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rural areas. According to Christian leaders, this was due to a combination of outdated bureaucracy and discrimination against Christians.

The length of the application process, varying from two weeks to several years, may have deterred some religious groups wishing to register. Some Christian groups alleged one of the main reasons for government officials' refusal to register a church was that the officials believed there were "too many" churches, or that there should at least be parity in the registration of Buddhist temples and Christian churches. Registration problems were particularly serious in Tuv province, which had no registered churches. Numerous religious leaders reported that the chief of the Tuv provincial legislature explicitly stated his opposition to registering any churches. According to evangelical leaders, more than 30 unregistered evangelical churches operated in the province and were reportedly subject to close monitoring and scrutiny from the authorities.

Evangelical leaders also reported government opposition to Christian activities in Bayan-Olgii province, which was predominantly Kazakh Muslim. Other regions reported fewer issues regarding registration for minority religious groups.

A Protestant church with more than 100 members in the city of Erdenet, Orkhon province, in contrast to previous years, reported being permitted to register for three years, rather than just one. Nevertheless, foreign religious leaders in Erdenet also reported that only five out of 20 churches were registered, adding that unregistered churches frequently had difficulties with the authorities in conducting religious activities. Mongolian-run churches reportedly experienced fewer problems.

The government granted religious visas for individuals intending to stay in the country more than 90 days, but the application process was lengthy. Only officially registered religious groups could sponsor religious visas. Christian groups reported that missionaries seeking to enter the country were usually given other types of visas (such as student or business), thereby restricting the scope of religious activities in which they could participate and making them more vulnerable to deportation due to inconsistent policies regarding what was permitted for foreign visitors. Christian groups also said certain immigration officials categorically denied visas if they believed the visitor was a Christian coming for religious purposes.

According to religious leaders and lawyers representing religious groups, some immigration officials reportedly called and threatened groups sponsoring work

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visas for Christian volunteers (there was no separate visa category for volunteers); the officials objected to the volunteers' extracurricular religious activities.

Observers reported that foreigners carrying out missionary activities without a religious visa were sometimes deported on the basis of visa violation technicalities often unconnected with religious activities. Local lawyers representing Christian groups reported that the immigration agency was more tolerant than in previous years of foreigners volunteering their time for religious activities.

Due to the sensitivity of these visa issues, individual religious groups were reluctant to criticize local authorities publicly.

Some government officials criticized Christian charitable efforts, alleging the charity workers used material incentives to attract potential converts.

The government contributed financially to the restoration of several Buddhist sites that were important religious, historical, and cultural centers. The government did not otherwise subsidize Buddhism or any other religious groups.

The Muslim community reported no problems securing government permits for ongoing construction of a new Islamic cultural center and mosque in Ulaanbaatar. However, construction stopped due to decreases in funding from sponsoring Arab countries in the wake of economic problems. Previously, mosques and Islamic centers received financial assistance from religious groups in Kazakhstan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf States.

Parliament internally observed a number of official Buddhist and shamanist ceremonies.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Christian leaders reported that the growing influence of Christianity worried some Buddhist leaders in the country and in certain cases led to harassment of Christians. The country's political leaders continued to support Buddhism overtly, and there was fear that foreigners and foreign influence could lead to a steady erosion of respect for the country's culture. Despite this, the first openly Christian member of parliament was elected in June.

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Government institutions, as well as informal hiring quota policies dating back to the Soviet era, strongly supported the Muslim community (which is overwhelmingly ethnically Kazakh). Kazakh Muslims served in virtually every government institution, including two members of parliament.

Practitioners of shamanism reported some harassment by Buddhists, primarily by officials and community leaders who used their authority to deny the shamanists equal access to public resources such as public television.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials frequently discussed religious freedom with government officials at the local, provincial, and national levels, including in meetings with high-level officials in the Ministry of Justice, key parliamentarians, and provincial political leaders. Embassy officials engaged in regular dialogue with government representatives and shared the U.S. government's concerns, particularly about the uneven application of visa laws and the registration difficulties Christian groups and others experienced. Embassy officials encouraged the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to enhance their efforts to protect religious freedom. Embassy officials also met frequently with religious leaders across the country to discuss ways to combat religious discrimination and promote greater religious freedom. In addition, the embassy invited Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim leaders to embassy events in order to promote respect for religious freedom and tolerance.