

BHUTAN 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom, but in practice, the government limited this freedom by curtailing religious activity that it believed interfered with the country's identity and stability. The government made statements promoting religious tolerance, especially of Christians. The government continued to deny members of the clergy voting rights and the right to run for public office, a practice the government defended as necessary because of the strict constitutional separation of religion from politics.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, including in rural areas and in schools. There was societal pressure on non-Buddhists to uphold the "Buddhist spiritual heritage" of the country, including participating in Buddhist prayers and rituals.

There are no formal diplomatic relations between the United States and the government, although informal relations are coordinated through the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi and through Bhutan's Permanent Mission to the UN in New York. The U.S. government continued to encourage the government to uphold human rights and religious freedom as part of its democratization process. U.S. officials raised issues of religious freedom with government officials.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 725,000 (July 2013 estimate). According to a U.S. government estimate, approximately 75 percent of the population practices Drukpa Kagyu or Nyingmapa Buddhism, both of which are disciplines of Mahayana Buddhism. The Nepali-speaking minority includes a small number of Christians and Buddhists, although most are Hindu. Hindus represent approximately 25 percent of the total population. Hindu temples exist primarily in southern areas.

Estimates put the number of Christians between 3,000 and 15,000, most of whom are reportedly concentrated in towns and in the south of the country. There is a small Muslim community comprised of Indian migrants. Although priests of the animist Bon tradition often officiate at and include Bon rituals in Buddhist festivals, very few citizens adhere exclusively to this religious tradition. The Sharchop ethnic group, which forms the majority of the population in the east,

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reportedly practices Tibetan Buddhism combined with elements of the Bon tradition and Hinduism.

According to a December 2012 estimate by the Ministry of Labor and Resources, just over 52,000 Indian laborers are present in the country, most of whom are Hindu or Muslim.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom, although the constitution recognizes Buddhism as the state's "spiritual heritage."

The constitution stipulates, "A Bhutanese citizen shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. No person shall be compelled to belong to another faith by means of coercion or inducement." It also bans discrimination based on religion. The constitution mandates that the king be the "protector of all religions."

Government approval is required to construct religious buildings and, according to the law, these buildings should adhere to the country's traditional architectural norms.

Both law and policy enforce a strict separation between religion and politics. The king and Je Khenpo (Chief Abbot of the Central Monastic Body) previously served as dual head of state until the 2008 constitution established a democratic constitutional monarchy that eliminated the political role of monastic institutions. No ordained members of the clergy, irrespective of religion and including the sizable population of Buddhist monks, are permitted to engage in political activities, including running for office or voting.

The law prohibits "words either spoken or written, or by other means whatsoever, that promote or attempt to promote, on grounds of religion, race, language, caste, or community, or on any other ground whatsoever, feelings of enmity or hatred between different religious, racial, or language groups or castes and communities." Violations are punishable by up to three years in prison. There were no reports of prosecutions under the act.

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The penal code states that a defendant shall be found guilty of promoting civil unrest by advocating “religious abhorrence” or committing an act that is “prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony between different nationalities, racial groups, castes, and religious groups and that disturbs the public tranquility.” The punishment is five to nine years in prison. There were no reports of prosecutions under this law.

The penal code makes coercion or inducement to convert a misdemeanor punishable by up to three years in prison. The measure enforces a provision of the constitution that grants freedom of thought and expression and prohibits forceful conversion.

In addition to registering and regulating religious groups, the eight-member board of the Chhoedey Lhentshog, a religious regulatory authority, defines roles in religious institutions, enforces the prohibition on religious figures running in secular elections, and monitors religious fundraising activities. The Chhoedey Lhentshog has registered 85 religious groups to date. There is one registered non-Buddhist organization, the Hindu Dharma Samudaya, an umbrella body representing the Hindu population. There are no registered Christian religious organizations, although Christians meet in private venues to worship in informal groups.

The government subsidizes Buddhist monasteries and shrines and provides aid to most of the country’s monks and nuns. The government does not normally provide aid to clergy of other religions.

Government Practices

The government limited religious freedom in practice when it determined that religious activity interfered with the country’s identity or stability. There were reports of subtle pressure by the government on non-Buddhists to observe the traditional Drukpa values, including asking all students to participate in Buddhist rituals such as compulsory daily meditation in schools. The government took steps to improve respect for religious freedom by calling for religious tolerance, including of Christians.

In October 2012, the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) declared a ban on public religious gatherings for all citizens, beginning in January 2013 and lasting until the mid-year completion of parliamentary elections. Government officials

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stated that this ban was meant to protect the separation of religion and politics and to prevent divisive issues from influencing the elections. Following official and popular backlash, the ECB softened the ban, allowing public religious gatherings but discouraging politicians from using such gatherings for political gain. Election regulations did not allow political parties with religious platforms to register.

Followers of religions other than Buddhism and Hinduism generally were free to worship in private, but public places of worship were generally not available. The Chhoekey Lhentshog did not register any Christian groups, but it reported that none had applied for registration. Without registration, religious groups were able to operate freely but were unable to exercise certain rights such as property ownership. Conversions to Christianity took place, but some members of the Christian community stated they needed to hold religious meetings discreetly. Christian congregations met in non-religiously labeled private buildings.

There were reports that the registration process favored Buddhist over Hindu temples, although the government approved the construction of a large Hindu temple in Thimphu. One Buddhist association alleged the government restricted the construction of a Buddhist monastery belonging to the Nyingmapa school, because the Drukpa Kagyu school had state and royal patronage.

The government provided financial assistance for the construction of Buddhist temples and shrines and funding for monks and monasteries. The government stated that although the demand for Buddhist temples exceeded that for Hindu temples, it supported Hindu temples in the south where most Hindus resided, and it provided scholarships for Hindus to study Sanskrit in India.

The government stated there was no religious curriculum in the country's educational institutions, but local nongovernmental organizations reported students had to take part in a compulsory Buddhist prayer session each morning. Religious teaching remained forbidden in all schools except monastic institutions.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal discrimination and harassment based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, including denial of admission to non-Buddhist children in schools and verbal abuse of non-Buddhists in rural areas.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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There are no formal diplomatic relations between the United States and the government, although informal relations are coordinated through the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi and Bhutan's Permanent Mission to the UN in New York. The U.S. government worked to promote religious freedom by sponsoring travel of citizens to the United States under U.S. government exchange programs. The assistant secretary and deputy assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asia, as well as the U.S. Ambassador to India, raised issues of religious freedom with the government during official meetings.