

BHUTAN 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the freedom of religion and bans discrimination based on religious belief. The law, however, restricts certain forms of religious speech, limits public religious gatherings, and requires all religious groups to register with the government. The government registered only Buddhist groups and one Hindu umbrella organization. Some religious groups state they were unable to register, reporting that their applications were ignored although never officially denied. Since other groups were unable to register, public spaces of worship were available only for Buddhists and Hindus; however, individuals from other faiths were sometimes able to worship in private. On September 11, two pastors were fined and sentenced to prison under penal code provisions that apply to unlicensed large assemblies and the receipt of foreign funds without requisite approval, according to the government; activists stated the pastors were targeted because of their evangelical activities.

There was continued strong societal pressure on individuals to maintain Buddhist beliefs, traditions, and practices. There were reports that some school administrators denied admission to non-Buddhist children. Members of religious minorities in rural areas reported incidents of verbal harassment from Buddhist neighbors.

The U.S. Ambassador to India raised issues relating to religious freedom with the government during official meetings in April. During a visit in July embassy representatives and State Department officials raised with members of Bhutan's religious regulatory authority, the Commission for Religious Organizations (Chhoedey Lhentshog), and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs concerns about religious freedom, with particular focus on the treatment and status of religious minorities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 733,000 (July 2014 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. Hindus represent approximately 22 percent of the total population and mostly reside in southern areas of the country.

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The number of Christians in the country is difficult to determine because many do not practice openly. Estimates range from 2,000 to 25,000. Most Christians 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 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, practices elements of Tibetan Buddhism combined with elements of the Bon tradition and Hinduism.

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

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution stipulates that every citizen has “the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.” It also bans discrimination based on religion and states that “no person shall be compelled to belong to another faith by means of coercion or inducement.” The constitution recognizes Buddhism as the state’s “spiritual heritage” and mandates that the king be the “protector of all religions.”

The law mandates a strict separation between religious institutions and the government. According to the penal code, coercion or inducement to convert is considered a misdemeanor and is punishable by up to three years in prison. The measure implements a provision of the constitution that grants freedom of thought and expression and prohibits forceful conversion.

The law prohibits oral or written communication that promotes enmity between religious groups. Violations are punishable by up to three years in prison. There were no reports of prosecutions.

The penal code states that individuals found guilty of promoting civil unrest by advocating religious abhorrence, disturbing public tranquility, or committing an act that is prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony between religious groups shall be subject to punishment of five to nine years in prison. There were no reports of prosecutions.

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By law, religious groups are required to register with the government. In order to register, a religious group must submit an application. Without registration, a religious organization is not recognized by the government and may not organize publicly, own property, accept money, conduct outreach activities, import literature, or hold worship services. The law permits the government to “avoid breaches of the peace” by requiring licenses for public assembly, prohibiting assembly in designated areas, and imposing curfews. Religious organizations that the government deems a threat to the spiritual heritage of the country, as expressed in the constitution, are prohibited from registering.

The eight-member board of the Commission for Religious Organizations defines the structure of religious institutions, enforces the prohibition on religious leaders running in secular elections, and monitors religious fundraising activities. The Commission for Religious Organizations is required to “ensure that religious institutions and personalities promote the spiritual heritage of the country” by developing a society “rooted in Buddhist ethos.”

Government approval is required to construct religious buildings. All religious buildings are subject to legal requirements to adhere to traditional Bhutanese architectural standards.

Religious organizations are prohibited from being involved in political activity. 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.

Government Practices

On September 11, two pastors were fined and sentenced to prison under penal code provisions that apply to unlicensed large assemblies and the receipt of foreign funds without requisite approval, according to the government; activists argued that the pastors were targeted because of their evangelical activities. Both were initially detained beginning in March for 49 days and then released. According to activists, the government charged Pastor Tandin Wangyal and Pastor M.B. Thapa with raising funds for civil society organizations without permission and for screening a film publicly without permission. Activists stated that the film was a Christian music video screened outside on private property. According to media reports, Pastor Tandin Wangyal was sentenced to four years in prison and was granted bail after he paid a fine of 47,000 ngultrums (\$744). Sources stated he

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remained free on bail at year's end as he appealed his case. Pastor M.B. Thapa was sentenced to two and one half years in prison but was exempted from imprisonment after he paid a fine of 103,000 ngultrums (\$1,630). Government officials stated the period of the pastors' initial detention had been in accordance with Bhutanese law, and said they would not be discriminated against but would be treated as all other Bhutanese defendants would be.

Some religious groups and media contacts reported that the government extended preferential treatment to Buddhist groups in terms of registration and financial support. Some government institutions, such as courts, continued to be housed within Buddhist monasteries. Some religious groups state that ceremonies associated with the government involved mandatory Buddhist prayer ritual. Some sources stated that the government pressured non-Buddhists to observe traditional Drukpa values, including pressuring government employees to participate in Buddhist prayer rituals at the risk of losing their jobs or promotion opportunities.

The Commission for Religious Organizations registered 9 additional religious groups. Of a total of 94 registered groups, the Hindu Dharma Samudaya, an umbrella body representing the Hindu population, is the only registered non-Buddhist organization. There are no registered Christian or Muslim religious organizations.

The Commission for Religious Organizations reported that no Christian groups had applied for registration. Members of some Christian organizations refuted this, stating that Christian groups had attempted to register on multiple occasions in recent years but received no official response. Christian congregations met in private buildings. Conversions to Christianity took place, but some members of the Christian community stated they perceived a need to hold religious meetings discreetly in order to avoid government harassment and punishment. Some Christians living close to the border areas reportedly traveled to India for worship.

Without registered status, religious groups were sometimes able to worship in private but were unable to exercise certain rights such as property ownership.

The government provided financial assistance for the construction of Buddhist temples and shrines, as well as funding for monks and monasteries. The government stated that it supported Hindu temples in the south where most of the Hindu population reside and also began constructing a large Hindu temple in Thimphu.

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Religious education remained forbidden in all schools except monastic institutions, but local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported students were required to take part in a compulsory Buddhist prayer session each morning. The government provided scholarships for Hindus to study Sanskrit in India.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There was continued strong societal pressure on individuals to maintain Buddhist beliefs, traditions, and practices. For instance, there were reports that some school administrators denied admission to non-Buddhist children. Members of religious minorities in rural areas reported incidents of verbal harassment from Buddhist neighbors.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

There are no formal diplomatic relations between the United States and the Bhutanese government, although informal relations are coordinated through the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi. The U.S. government worked to promote religious freedom through direct engagement with government officials, and through meetings with NGOs and members of various religious communities. The U.S. Ambassador to India raised issues of religious freedom with the government in April. During a visit in July representatives from the embassy and the State Department met with members of the Commission for Religious Organizations, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee, to raise concerns regarding the treatment of religious minorities.