

# **BHUTAN 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom, but in practice, the government limited this freedom, based on its determination that religious activity interfered with the country's identity and stability. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. The government made statements promoting religious tolerance, especially of Christians. However, the government continued to deny religious figures voting rights and the right to run for public office, a practice the government defended as necessary because of the constitutional principle of separating religion from politics.

There were unconfirmed 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 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**

A 2011 World Bank report indicates the population is approximately 738,000. 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. Most of the Nepali-speaking minority is Hindu, although there are small numbers of Christians and Buddhists. Hindus represent approximately 25 percent of the population. Hindu temples exist in southern areas. Christians are reportedly concentrated in towns and in the south.

According to unconfirmed estimates, there are between 3,000 and 15,000 Christians in the country. There are also reports of a few Muslims. Although priests of the animist Bon tradition often officiate at and include Bon rituals in Buddhist festivals, very few citizens adhere exclusively to this religion. The

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Sharchops ethnic group, which forms the majority of the population of eastern Bhutan, reportedly practices Tibetan Buddhism combined with elements of the Bon tradition and Hinduism.

According to an April estimate by the Ministry of Labor and Resources, just over 55,000 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 protect religious freedom, but officially recognize only Buddhism and Hinduism.

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 states, “No one shall be discriminated against on the grounds of race, sex, language, religion, politics, or other status.”

The constitution states that Buddhism is the state’s “spiritual heritage.” The constitution mandates that the king be the “protector of all religions” in the country. Government approval is required to construct religious buildings and, according to the law, these buildings should adhere to the country’s traditional architectural norms.

The National Security Act (NSA) 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.” Violating the NSA is punishable by up to three years in prison. There were no reports of prosecutions under the act during the year.

The penal code states that a defendant shall be found guilty of promoting civil unrest by 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 during the year.

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A 2010 amendment to the penal code made coercion or inducement to convert a misdemeanor punishable by up to three years in prison. Bhutanese officials assert the measure fulfills a mandate extended by Article 7(4) of the constitution, which 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 established in 2009, defines roles in religious institutions, precludes religious figures from running in secular elections, and helps ensure that religious fundraising activities are lawful and non-predatory. The Chhoedey Lhentshog has registered 16 groups to date. There is one registered non-Buddhist organization, the Hindu Dharma Samudaya, an umbrella body representing the Hindu population.

There are no laws against publishing religious materials.

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

The government asserts there is no religious curriculum in educational institutions, but local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) report students must take part in a compulsory Buddhist prayer session each morning. Religious teaching is forbidden in all schools except monastic institutions.

The government observes the following major Buddhist holidays as national holidays: Shabdrung Kuchoe, Parnirvana, First Sermon of Lord Buddha (formerly known as Drukpa Tshe Zhi), and Lhabab Duechen (or Descending Day of Lord Buddha). By declaration of the king, Dashain, the main Hindu festival celebrated in Nepal, is a national holiday.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. The government limited religious freedom in practice whenever 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.

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In October the Election Commission declared a ban on public religious gatherings for all citizens, to begin in January 2013 and last until the mid-year completion of 2013 parliamentary elections. Bhutanese government officials 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 Election Commission softened the ban, allowing public religious gatherings but discouraging politicians from leveraging such gatherings for political gain. Elections regulations did not allow political parties with religious platforms to register. Additionally, all religious figures including Buddhist monks did not have the right to vote or run for public office.

The government expelled or persuaded to leave approximately 90,000 Nepali-speaking residents, a majority of them Hindus, in the early 1990s. The government asserted that these individuals were illegal immigrants, a claim denied by many of those expelled. The expelled population relocated to refugee camps in eastern Nepal. Due to stalled negotiations between Nepal and the government on the repatriation of the Bhutanese refugees, the United States and seven other countries proposed a third-country resettlement program, which started in 2008 and continued at year's end. To date, the United States has resettled over 62,000 refugees.

There were reports of government regulation and harassment of religious minorities. Followers of religions other than Buddhism and Hinduism generally were free to worship in private, but the government did not grant them permission to build religious buildings or practice their religions in public. The Chhoedey Lhentshog did not register any Christian groups. Conversions to Christianity took place, but some Christian groups claimed that religious meetings had to be held discreetly. Some Christian congregations had 400-500 members and met in non-religiously labeled private buildings.

There were no reports that publishing Bibles and building Christian schools were prohibited.

A government license was required to construct new buildings, including places of worship. Unconfirmed reports suggested this process favored Buddhist over Hindu temples, although the government approved the construction of a Hindu temple in Thimphu. One Buddhist association reported the government restricted the construction of a Buddhist monastery belonging to the Nyingmapa sect, because the Drukpa Kagyu sect enjoys state and royal patronage. The government

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

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

There were unconfirmed 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**

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 the country's mission to the UN in New York. The U.S. government worked to promote human rights, religious freedom, and other democratic values by sponsoring travel of citizens to the United States under Fulbright and other 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 Bhutanese government during official meetings.