

BHUTAN 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution recognizes Buddhism as the state's "spiritual heritage." It provides for the freedom of religion and bans discrimination based on religious belief. The constitution states religious institutions and personalities shall remain "above politics." The law restricts religious speech promoting enmity between religious groups and requires religious groups to obtain licenses to hold public religious gatherings. The government released Pastor Tandin Wangyal from prison after he paid a fine following his 2014 conviction on charges including unauthorized fundraising. Nongovernmental organization (NGO) representatives said the lack of a clear definition of what the law meant by "inducements" to conversion placed the activities of minority religious groups at risk of legal sanction. The government has registered only Buddhist groups and one Hindu umbrella organization; there are no registered Christian or Muslim groups. Unregistered groups were generally able to worship in private, although the Christian community continued to hold religious meetings discreetly.

According to NGOs, there continued to be societal pressure on individuals to participate in Buddhist traditions and practices. There continued to be reports some school administrators denied admission to non-Buddhist children. An NGO representative said members of religious minorities in rural areas reported incidents of verbal harassment from Buddhist neighbors.

The United States does not have a diplomatic presence in the country. Officers from the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi visited periodically and promoted equal treatment for religious minorities in meetings with government officials.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 742,000 (July 2015 estimate). According to a U.S. government estimate, approximately 75 percent of the population are followers of the Drukpa Kagyu or Nyingma schools of Buddhism. Hindus represent approximately 22 percent of the total population and mostly reside in southern areas of the country, according to the Pew Research Center.

Estimates of the size of the Christian community range from 2,000 (from the Pew Research Center) to 25,000 (from Christian groups). Most Christians are

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reportedly concentrated in towns and in the south of the country. Although the animist Bon tradition is often combined with Buddhist practices, according to scholars 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 the advocacy group Alliance Defending Freedom.

According to a December 2012 estimate, the most recent data available from the Ministry of Labor and Resources, between 48,000 and 52,000 Indian laborers were present in the country, depending on the season, most of whom were Hindu or Muslim.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution recognizes Buddhism as the state's "spiritual heritage," and states it is "the responsibility of all religious institutions and personalities to promote the spiritual heritage of the country." The constitution states every citizen has "the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion" and bans discrimination based on religion. The constitution states the king must be Buddhist and requires the king to be the "protector of all religions."

The constitution states "no person shall be compelled to belong to another faith by means of coercion or inducement." The penal code criminalizes coercion or inducement to convert as a misdemeanor punishable by up to three years imprisonment.

The law prohibits oral or written communication promoting enmity between religious groups and provides for sentences of up to three years imprisonment for violations. There were no reports of prosecutions.

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

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The law requires religious groups to register with the Commission for Religious Organizations (CRO). In order to register, a religious group must submit an application demonstrating its leaders are citizens and disclosing their educational background and financial assets. The law also specifies the organizational structure, bylaws, and procedural rules registered religious organizations must follow. The law says no religious organization shall violate the spiritual heritage of the country. The law also states no religious organization shall do anything to impair the sovereignty, security, unity, or territorial integrity of the country. The law mandates the CRO certify religious groups applying for registration meet the requirements specified in the law.

Registered religious groups may raise funds for religious activities and are exempt from taxes. Registered groups require permission from local government authorities to hold public meetings and permission from the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs to invite foreign speakers or receive foreign funds.

The government does not recognize unregistered religious groups, and they may not organize publicly, own property, raise funds, conduct outreach activities, or import literature. According to the law, illegal activities of this kind are subject to penalties prescribed by the penal code, which specifies punishments ranging from fines to prison terms, depending upon the offense. Unregistered religious groups may hold private worship services in homes.

The law specifies a number of offenses related to religious groups, including providing false or misleading information, misuse of investments, and illegal fundraising, which the law defines as a misdemeanor resulting in a fine or suspension or cancellation of the group's registration.

The law states the CRO shall consist of an eight-member board to oversee the structure of religious institutions, enforce the constitutional separation between the government and religious organizations, and monitor religious fundraising activities. The law requires the CRO to "ensure that religious institutions and personalities promote the spiritual heritage of the country" by developing a society "rooted in Buddhist ethos."

The constitution states the king shall appoint the chief abbot of the central monastic body on the advice of the five masters of the monastic body. Those individuals, and a civil servant administrative secretary, make up the Commission for Monastic Affairs, which is responsible for matters relating to Buddhist

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doctrine. The constitution says the state will provide funds and “facilities” to the central monastic body.

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.

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

The constitution states it is the responsibility of religious institutions to ensure religion remains separate from the state. It says “religious institutions and personalities shall remain above politics.”

The law prohibits religious organizations from involvement in political activity. Ordained members of the clergy of any religion are prohibited from engaging in political activities, including running for office or voting.

Government Practices

The government released evangelical Pastor Tandin Wangyal from prison on January 19, after he paid a fine of 100,000 ngultrum (\$1,511) following his September 2014 sentencing to a four-year prison term on charges of unauthorized fundraising for civil society organizations and the unlicensed public screening of a film. The government had previously released Wangyal’s codefendant, Pastor Mon Thapa, also known as Lobzang, in 2014 after he paid a fine of 98,800 ngultrum (\$1,493). At the time of their arrest and trial, the government outlined criminal charges based on penal code provisions regarding unlicensed large assemblies and the receipt of foreign funds without requisite approval. Religious activists said the government had targeted the pastors because of their evangelical activities.

NGO representatives stated the lack of a clear definition in the constitution and legal code for terms such as “inducement” to religious conversion placed the religious activities of minority religious groups, particularly Christian groups, at risk of legal sanction. These NGO representatives cited religious teaching, charitable services, and public education as examples of activities which could theoretically be penalized. Civil society representatives said there was the

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potential for misuse and arbitrary action by the government. They said, however, religious conversions did take place.

Christian groups and media sources stated the government continued to extend preferential treatment to Buddhist groups in terms of registration and financial support. The CRO registered two additional Buddhist religious groups during the year. Of a total of 96 registered groups, the Hindu Dharma Samudaya, an umbrella body representing the Hindu population, remained the only registered non-Buddhist organization. There were no registered Christian or Muslim religious organizations.

As it has in previous years, the CRO reported no Christian groups had applied for registration. Members of Christian associations said Christian groups had attempted to register on multiple occasions in the past, but had received no official response.

NGO representatives reported unregistered religious groups were generally able to worship in private, but remained unable to exercise certain rights such as property ownership.

Members of the Christian community stated they continued to hold religious meetings discreetly and generally met in private buildings. Some Christians living close to the border areas reportedly continued to travel to India for worship.

Government financial assistance for the construction of Buddhist temples and shrines continued, as well as funding for monks and monasteries. Government construction of a large Hindu temple in Thimphu continued.

Local NGOs reported compulsory Buddhist prayer sessions continued to take place in schools each morning. The government continued to provide scholarships for Hindus to study Sanskrit in India.

Some government institutions, such as courts, continued to be housed within Buddhist monasteries. Some religious groups stated government ceremonies involved mandatory Buddhist prayer rituals. NGO representatives reported the government continued to pressure non-Buddhists to observe “traditional Drukpa values” and participate in Buddhist prayer rituals. According to NGOs, some non-Buddhist government employees said they believed their participation in these ceremonies was a requirement for career advancement.

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Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to NGOs, there continued to be societal pressure on individuals to participate in Buddhist traditions and practices. An NGO representative said members of religious minorities in rural areas reported incidents of verbal harassment from Buddhist neighbors. There continued to be reports some school administrators denied admission to non-Buddhist children.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The United States does not have a diplomatic presence in the country and does not maintain formal diplomatic relations with the government. The U.S. Embassy in New Delhi conducted informal relations through periodic visits, including by the Ambassador. Embassy officers promoted tolerance of religious minorities in meetings with government officials, and discussed religious issues in meetings with NGOs and members of various religious communities. U.S. officials raised the same points in meetings with the Bhutanese Mission to the United Nations in New York and with Bhutanese officials who traveled to Washington.