

BHUTAN 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution recognizes Buddhism as the state’s “spiritual heritage,” provides for 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 and written communication promoting enmity among religious groups and requires religious groups to obtain licenses to hold public religious gatherings. International nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) continued to report that the lack of clarity in the law addressing “inducements” to conversion placed the activities of minority religious groups at risk of legal sanction, although the country’s religious minority groups reported no such sanction or pressure during the year. The government’s Commission for Religious Organizations (CRO) did not approve any new religious groups during the year. Unregistered religious groups, including Christians, reported being able to worship in private, although unregistered groups were not permitted to organize publicly, own property, raise funds, conduct outreach activities, or import literature. In its report for 2022 (which covered events in 2021) the international Christian NGO Open Doors alleged discrimination against Christians, stating that Christians often faced difficulty obtaining “nonobjection certificates” from local authorities; these were required for loan and employment applications, property registration and renewing identification cards. One local organization said this was not the case, except when the applicant had a criminal record. Members of the Hindu Dharmic Samudaya, one of eight religious organizations on the CRO’s board, continued to cite strong official support for Hindu religious practice.

Some converts reported continued societal pressure on individuals to participate in Buddhist traditions and practices. Open Doors said converts to Christianity faced intense pressure to return to their former religion, especially from their relatives, who viewed their conversions as bringing shame to their entire family.

The United States does not have formal diplomatic relations with Bhutan; the U.S. embassy in New Delhi oversees unofficial bilateral relations. During the year, the U.S. embassy engaged government officials on religious freedom issues and met virtually with community and religious leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 857,000 (midyear 2021). According to a 2012 report by the Pew Research Center, approximately 75 percent of the population follows Buddhism and 23 percent are Hindu. Hindus reside mostly in southern areas adjacent to India. The 2020 report by the World Christian Database estimated that Buddhists comprised 83 percent of the population and Hindus 11 percent in 2019.

The 2012 Pew Research Center report estimates of the size of the Christian community ranges from 0.5 to 3.6 percent of the total population. The Open Doors report covering 2021 estimates the Christian population at 30,000 (approximately 3.5 percent). Most Christians are concentrated in towns in the south. According to scholars, although individuals often combine Bon (an indigenous Tibetan religious tradition) practices with Buddhist practices, very few citizens adhere exclusively to this religious tradition. The Sharchop ethnic group, which makes up the majority of the population in the east, practices elements of Tibetan Buddhism combined with elements of the Bon tradition and Hinduism, according to scholars.

Most of the country's foreign workers come from India. In 2019 (most recent data available), India's Ministry of External Affairs estimated that 60,000 Indian nationals lived in the country and 8,000 to 10,000 additional temporary workers entered the country daily. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, some Indian residents left the country and the government limited entry of most foreign workers. While there is no data on their religious affiliation, most foreign workers are likely Hindu and, in fewer numbers, Muslim.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution recognizes Buddhism as the state's "spiritual heritage" and stipulates it is "the responsibility of all religious institutions and personalities to promote the spiritual heritage of the country." The constitution provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion and bans discrimination based on faith. The constitution says the King must be Buddhist and requires the King to be the "protector of all religions."

The constitution also states, "No person shall be compelled to belong to another faith by means of coercion or inducement." The Religious Organizations Act states that "no religious organization shall compel any person to belong to another faith by providing reward or inducement for a person to belong to another faith."

The penal code criminalizes “coercion or inducement to convert” as a misdemeanor, punishable by up to three years’ imprisonment. Neither “coercion” nor “inducement to convert” is defined in law or regulation.

The law prohibits oral and written communication “promoting enmity among religious groups” and provides for sentences of up to three years’ imprisonment for violations.

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” among religious groups shall be subject to punishment of five to nine years’ imprisonment.

The law requires religious groups to register with the CRO. To register, a religious group must submit an application demonstrating its leaders are citizens of the country and disclosing their educational backgrounds and financial assets. The law also specifies the organizational structure, bylaws, and procedural rules for registered religious organizations. It prohibits religious organizations from “violating the spiritual heritage” of the country and requires them to protect and promote it. The law also states no religious organization shall do anything to impair the sovereignty, security, unity, or territorial integrity of the country. It mandates that the CRO certify that religious groups applying for registration meet the specified requirements.

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

Unregistered religious groups may not organize public religious services, own property, raise funds, conduct outreach activities, or import literature. Penalties for unregistered organizations performing these activities range from fines to prison terms, depending on the offense. The law states it is an offense for a religious group to provide false or misleading information in its religious teachings, to misuse investments, or to raise funds illegally. The CRO has the authority to determine whether the content of a group’s religious teachings is false or misleading and whether it has raised funds illegally. Sanctions include fines and potential revocation of registration.

The law states that the CRO shall consist of an eight-member board responsible for overseeing the structure of religious institutions, enforcing the constitutional separation between the government and religious organizations, and monitoring religious fundraising activities. The chairperson of the board is a cabinet minister appointed by the Prime Minister. A senior official from the Ministry of Finance and one of the King's appointees to the National Council also sit on the board. The director of culture in the Ministry of Home Affairs serves ex officio as secretary. Heads of Buddhist religious organizations and the Hindu Dharma Samudaya, a registered Hindu organization, occupy the remaining seats. 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 country's Central Monastic Body, on the advice of the five masters of the Buddhist monastic body. Those individuals and a civil servant administrative secretary make up the Commission for Monastic Affairs, which manages issues related to Buddhist 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. The government may apply these measures to groups and organizations of all kinds, including religious groups.

Government approval is required to construct religious buildings. By law, all buildings, including religious structures, must adhere to traditional architectural standards. The CRO determines conformity with these standards.

The constitution states that religious institutions and personalities have the responsibility to ensure that "religion remains separate from politics in Bhutan." It also states, "Religious institutions and personalities shall remain above politics." The law also prohibits religious organizations from involvement in political activity. Ordained members of the clergy of any religion may not engage in political activities, including running for office and voting.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

International NGOs continued to report that the lack of clarity in the law addressing “inducements” to conversion placed the activities of minority religious groups at risk of legal sanction, although the country’s religious minority groups reported no such sanction or pressure during the year.

There were no applications to register religious organizations during the year, compared with 14 in 2020. There was no information available regarding the composition of the 14 groups. There were 139 religious organizations registered with the government as of December: 137 Buddhist and two Hindu. The CRO took no action on any pending church registration requests. The government did not offer any official explanation to applicants.

Unregistered religious groups, including Christians, reported being able to worship in private, although unregistered groups were not permitted to organize publicly, own property, raise funds, conduct outreach activities, or import literature.

Christian groups said they continued to be unable to acquire burial plots and there was no clear governmental process to do so. Some groups instead buried their dead in undeveloped areas away from settlements. One group said there was no official directive requiring cremation of the dead, but that government contacts informally urged cremation. The group said cremation remained the clear national preference, given the broad influence of Buddhist practice and tradition, and that as a minority religious group, Christians had little influence on this issue.

Some Christian groups said that Christians had fewer officially endorsed public celebrations than the Hindu community.

The Open Doors report covering 2021 said Christians often faced difficulty obtaining “nonobjection certificates” from local authorities; these were required for loan and employment applications, property registration and renewing identification cards. One local organization said it was not difficult to obtain a certificate, except when the applicant had a criminal record.

The government continued its financial assistance for the construction of Buddhist temples and shrines as well as funding for Buddhist monks and monasteries. According to the NGO Minority Rights Group International, authorities gave Buddhist temples priority over Hindu temples in the licensing process.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government imposed strict safety protocols and prohibited religious gatherings and associated activities during the nationwide lockdown from January to February 13.

Some courts and other government institutions remained housed within or adjacent to Buddhist monasteries. Some religious groups stated that government ceremonies continued to involve mandatory Buddhist prayer rituals.

Members of the Hindu Dharmic Samudaya continued to cite strong official support for Hindu religious practice.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some converts reported continued societal pressure on individuals to participate in Buddhist traditions and practices. The Open Doors 2021 report said converts to Christianity faced intense pressure to return to their former religion, especially from relatives who viewed the conversions as bringing shame to their entire family. The NGO characterized persecution of Christians in the country as “very high.” The NGO report said that anyone who left Buddhism was viewed with suspicion by neighbors and friends, and family members went to great lengths to bring converts back to their original faith. One local organization said persecution varied in different regions of the country, with pressure to return to Buddhism likely to be higher in rural areas.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The United States does not have formal diplomatic relations with Bhutan; the U.S. embassy in New Delhi oversees unofficial bilateral relations. During the year, the embassy engaged government officials on religious freedom issues and met virtually with community and religious leaders.