

BHUTAN 2022 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.

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 most recent annual report, the international Christian NGO Open Doors alleged discrimination against Christians, stating that local authorities often refused to issue Christians with a non-objection certificate, which was needed for loan applications, registering property, applying for jobs and the renewal of identification cards. Christian pastors said that their congregations no longer experienced difficulties in obtaining these certificates. Christian groups continued to report that their primary concern remained the inability to acquire burial plots and the lack of a governmental process to do so. Members of the Hindu Dharmic Samudaya, one of eight religious organizations on the CRO's board, noted strong official support for Hindu religious practice. The Hindu Devi Panchayan Temple in Thimphu, funded by the government, approved by the King, and consecrated in 2019, formally opened on September 23.

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. In three visits to the country during the year, U.S. embassy personnel engaged government officials on religious freedom issues, including the country's religious landscape, the current

status of religious minority groups, and government policies related to religious freedom. They also met with community and religious leaders and individuals from the country's religious minority communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 867,775 (midyear 2022). The National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan estimates the total population to be approximately 763,000 as of 2022. 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. A 2020 report by the World Christian Database estimated that Buddhists comprised 83 percent of the population and Hindus 11 percent in 2019.

The World Christian Database estimated that Christians comprised 2.3 percent of the population in 2019. Christian pastors said in September that an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 Christians resided in the country, spread among 250 congregations, mostly 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.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, India's Ministry of External Affairs estimated that 60,000 Indian nationals lived in the country (as of 2019). Since then, with some Indian residents leaving the country and the government restricting entry for most foreign workers in 2020, 2021, and most of 2022, the overall number of foreign workers is much smaller, around 18,000, with Indian residents the majority. While there is no data on their religious affiliation, most foreign workers remaining from India are likely Hindu and, in fewer numbers, Muslim.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Government Practices

No religious organizations applied to register in 2022 and 2021; 14 applied to register in 2020. There was no information available regarding the composition of the 14 groups. At the end of 2022, there were 139 religious organizations registered with the government: 137 Buddhist and two Hindu. The CRO took no action on any pending Christian 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 continued to report that their primary concern remained the inability to acquire burial plots and the lack of a governmental process to do so. Some groups consequently buried their dead in undeveloped areas away from settlements. One Christian group said there was no official directive requiring cremation of the dead, but that due to widespread cultural practice, government officials generally assumed that cremation would be practiced by all groups, including Christians. Pastors said that Christians had little influence on this issue.

Christian pastors stated their congregations no longer experienced difficulties in obtaining the “nonobjection certificates” from local authorities required for loan and employment applications, property registration, and renewing identification cards. The pastors said this had not been an issue “for a while.”

The government continued its financial assistance for the construction of Buddhist temples and shrines as well as funding for Buddhist monks and monasteries. The Hindu Devi Panchayan Temple in Thimphu, funded by the government, approved by the King, and consecrated in 2019, formally opened on September 23. According to the NGO Minority Rights Group International, authorities gave Buddhist temples priority over Hindu temples in the licensing process.

The government reopened borders in September and loosened most restrictions on religious and other public gatherings that had been in place during the year because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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

The government continued to recognize significant Buddhist and Hindu religious holidays as public holidays. The government did not recognize any Christian holidays as public holidays.

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

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, "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. There are no set term limits for the CRO. 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 (CMB), 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. There are no set term limits for the CMB. The constitution says the state will provide funds and “facilities” to the CMB.

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.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some converts reported continued societal pressure on individuals to participate in Buddhist traditions and practices. A Christian foreign resident saw this as an outgrowth of the influence of Buddhist culture and traditions in all aspects of society, rather than an effort to discriminate against Christian citizens. Other Christians said there was societal suspicion against them, including that Christians used financial incentives in proselytizing. An Open Doors report covering 2022

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 Open Doors report stated that anyone who left Buddhism was viewed with suspicion by neighbors and friends and that family members went to great lengths to bring converts back to their original faith. One local Christian group said views on conversion differed across regions of the country, with pressure to return to Buddhism likely higher in rural areas. Christian pastors said that their congregations responded to incidents of social stigma in their communities by citing the constitutional protections of freedom of religion and public statements by the King in 2019 in support of freedom of religion. One Christian pastor explained that having public figures who are Christian, including a former cabinet minister, was improving how Christians were perceived, but that change will happen slowly.

On June 21, the senior Buddhist authority in the country ordained a group of 144 women as bhikshunis, or female monks, at the Ramthangkha monastery. International Buddhist observers said the ceremony was “of historical importance for all women in Buddhism and brings Tibetan Buddhism into the 21st century.” According to RNS Religious News Service, such ordinations had taken place in the past, but not on this scale.

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, embassy representatives visited Bhutan three times and engaged government officials on religious freedom issues, including the country’s religious landscape, the current status of religious minority groups, and government policies related to religious freedom. They also met with leaders from the country’s religious minority communities, including Christian pastors and residents. Specific topics of discussion included reports of societal discrimination against minority faiths and the effect of COVID-19 pandemic rules on religious practices and worship.