Mongolia

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. However, the law limits proselytizing.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period. Some religious groups faced bureaucratic harassment from local governments or were denied registration.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, including pressure on persons who converted to Christianity.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 604,247 square miles and a population of 2.7 million. Buddhism is closely linked with the country's cultural traditions. When the Government ended bans on all religious practices in 1990, Buddhist activity increased. Local scholars claim that more than 90 percent of citizens subscribe to some form of Buddhism, although practice varies widely. Lamaist Buddhism of the Tibetan variety is the traditional and dominant religion.

Ethnic Kazakhs, most of whom are Muslim, are the largest ethnic minority. They constitute approximately 5 percent of the population nationwide and 80 percent of the population of the western province of Bayan-Olgiy. The Mongolian Muslim Association estimates that there are 135,000 Kazakh Muslims, fewer than last year due to migration to Kazakhstan. Muslims operate approximately 40 mosques and seven Islamic student centers, and there are an estimated 3,000 students of Islam. An Islamic cultural center is under construction in the capital of Ulaanbaatar. The mosques and Islamic centers receive financial assistance from religious organizations in Kazakhstan, Turkey, and the Gulf States.

There is a small but growing number of Christians. Church officials estimate more than 4 percent of the population practices Christianity, of which an estimated 90 percent are Protestant and 9 percent are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Roman Catholics and members of the Russian Orthodox Church together account for the remaining 1 percent. Some citizens practice shamanism, often in tandem with another religion, but there are no reliable statistics on their number.

Throughout the country, there were 457 registered places of worship, 239 of which were Buddhist, 161 Christian, 44 Muslim, and five each were Baha'i and shamanistic. During the reporting period, the Ministry of Justice and Home Affairs (MJHA) registered 18 churches, 20 mosques, and three shaman temples. Evangelical Christians estimated there were 250 unregistered evangelical churches throughout the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. However, the law limits proselytizing. Some religious groups seeking registration also face burdensome bureaucratic requirements and significant delays (see Restrictions). The Constitution explicitly recognizes the separation of church and state.

Although there is no state religion, many government officials are Buddhists who believe that Buddhism is the "natural religion" of the country. The Government contributed financially to the restoration of several Buddhist sites that are important religious, historical, and cultural centers. The Government did not otherwise subsidize Buddhism or any other religious groups.

A religious group must register with the MJHA to function legally as an organization. MJHA relegated responsibility for nongovernmental organization (NGO) registration (including religious organizations) to the newly created General Authority of State Registration (General Authority) in late 2008. Because registrations are only valid for 12 months, religious institutions must renew their registrations annually. Registrations can be renewed officially for up to three years. The Government approved at least 50 one-year extensions for religious groups in Ulaanbaatar in 2008. Registrations and renewals allow the Government to vet applications, as well as to supervise and limit the number of places of worship and clergy. The Government, particularly at the local level, sometimes reportedly used the registration process as a mechanism to limit the number of places for worship.

A group must provide the following documentation to the General Authority when applying to register: a letter requesting registration, a letter from the city council or other local authority granting approval to conduct religious services, a brief description of the organization, its charter, documentation of its founding, a list of leaders, financial information, brief biographic information on the person wishing to conduct religious services, and the expected number of worshippers. Although the General Authority possesses the ultimate authority to approve an organization's application, approval is largely pro forma. In practice, local legislative bodies adjudicate the applications and separate local registration, particularly when groups seek to operate in the countryside. The Ulaanbaatar City Council and other local legislative bodies require similar documentation prior to granting approval to conduct religious services.

The Government grants religious visas for individuals who intend to stay in the country more than 90 days, but the application process is time-consuming, and only 50 religious visas were granted in 2008.

All private religious schools receive state funding for their secular curriculums. The Government is prohibited by law from giving state funds to religious schools for religious education. This policy is equally applied to all religious groups.

Religious organizations are required to pay property taxes and social security. NGOs, including religious organizations, are not required to pay income tax, but some religious organizations outside the capital were apparently unaware of this provision and paid income taxes. All nondiplomatic individuals and organizations, including religious organizations, are required to pay customs duties and value added tax (VAT) on nonfinancial goods from abroad, including food, clothing, and medical donations.

By law, all foreign organizations must hire a certain number of nationals for every foreign employee. The mandatory percentage of national employees varies from 60 to 95 percent, depending on the industry. The law applies to both religious and secular organizations. Certain religious organizations have had difficulty obtaining visas because they did not meet their quota of national employees.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Both the preliminary registration and annual renewal process are burdensome for religious groups. The application process, which can range from two weeks to several years, may deter religious organizations that wish to register. Some Christian groups have alleged that local officials indicated there are "too many" churches or that there should at least be parity in the registration of new Buddhist temples and new Christian churches.

Authorities in Tuv Province, near Ulaanbaatar, continued to deny registration to Christian churches during the reporting period. There were no churches registered in the province. According to a Tuv religious leader, there were more than 30 unregistered evangelical churches in the province, but none of them had been approved by local authorities. One church that was denied registration during the reporting period sued provincial authorities. The court ruled in favor of the church and provincial authorities appealed the case to the Supreme Court.

Unregistered religious institutions were often able to function in practice. Some institutions reported harassment by authorities and were unable to sponsor foreign clergy for visas. Unregistered churches allegedly experienced harassment by frequent visits from local tax officers and police, although no fines were reported. Registered churches also reported harassment by local authorities who demanded that they present official documentation and, in some cases, requested bribes. It was unclear if the alleged harassment was religiously motivated, anti-foreign, or due to corruption.

Church leaders in other provinces reported fewer problems. One unregistered Christian church in Zavkhan Province reported that local officials were not strict about registration requirements. In Uvs Province, a Christian leader reported a positive relationship with local government officials who expressed appreciation for medical work the church provided.

The Muslim community in Ulaanbaatar continued to report on the difficult process of attaining registration and land acquisition for proposed mosques in the provinces of Darkhan-Uul and Orkhon. They reported no problems, however, with the ongoing construction of the Muslim cultural center and mosque in Ulaanbaatar.

A Ministry of Education directive banned instruction of foreign languages or other subjects that used religious teaching or instruction. Monitoring remained strict, especially in the capital area, but there were no reported violations of the ban during the reporting period. The Government may revoke the request of a religious group for an extension of registration if the group violates the ban or recommend that employers fire teachers who teach religion in the classroom. No such cases were reported during the reporting period.

The law forbids the spread of religious views by "force, pressure, material incentives, deception, or means which harm health or morals or are psychologically damaging." During the reporting period, no formal complaints were brought under this law.

Since July 2008, the Government has expelled approximately 70 foreign religious workers. In February 2009, Ulaanbaatar police detained for four hours a local lawyer who represented religious workers facing deportation. No charges were issued, but, according to the lawyer, he was fined, given an administrative penalty, and warned not to represent foreign religious workers in the future. Immigration officials also tried to revoke his law license and asked his employer to fire him. The lawyer appealed, and the court determined the police had acted illegally. The police appealed, and a decision had not been rendered at the end of the reporting period.

According to a local Christian organization, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture released three textbooks about Buddhist history to secondary school students in conjunction with the Buddhist Center in London. The Christian organization complained the Government was favoring Buddhism by distributing "religious textbooks" to students.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice during the reporting period. On a number of occasions, church authorities reported that foreign Christians in Ulaanbaatar were victims of assault or other crimes, although it was not clear whether the crimes were religiously motivated. Some Christian leaders believe the crimes were religiously motivated, but others felt the crimes against foreign missionaries were due to anti-foreign, rather than anti-Christian, sentiment.

Some citizens who believe Buddhism is the "natural religion" of the country criticized the alleged use of material incentives to attract potential converts to Christianity. A local Christian NGO reported that local attitudes towards Christianity were slowly improving as a result of churches' charity and development work.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. During the reporting period, U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom with government officials at the local, provincial, and national levels. This dialogue served to articulate a number of U.S. government concerns, particularly registration difficulties Christian groups and others experienced. Embassy officials encouraged the National Human Rights Commission to enhance its efforts to protect religious freedom. The embassy maintained contact with local representatives of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights and the U.N. Development Program to discuss religious freedom. Embassy officials also met frequently with religious leaders across the country.