

BHUTAN 2018 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 promoting enmity between religious groups and requires religious groups to obtain licenses to hold public religious gatherings. 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 by the government. NGO representatives, including the Alliance Defending Freedom, expressed continued concern over the lack of a clear definition in the constitution and legal code for terms such as "inducement" to religious conversion, which they indicated was tantamount to anticonversion legislation. Churches that applied for registration continued to await approval from the government's Commission for Religious Organizations (CRO). Because of these delays, there was only one registered non-Buddhist religious group in the country: the Hindu Dharma Samudaya, an umbrella body representing the Hindu population of the country; registered Buddhist groups increased from 95 to 110. Media reports indicated authorities continued to support construction of Hindu temples, including a major project in the capital. The NGO Open Doors continued to maintain the country on its watch list, stating the government suppressed Christianity. NGOs reported that unregistered religious groups continued to be able to worship in private, but according to the law, they were unable to organize publicly, own property, raise funds, conduct outreach activities, or import literature. Christians said they continued to hold religious meetings discreetly in private facilities; Christians living near the border with India continued to travel to Northeast India to worship and attend workshops, according to one foreign pastor. Open Doors reported that authorities did not permit a student to graduate because of her Christian faith.

According to NGOs, societal pressure on individuals to participate in Buddhist traditions and practices continued. One Christian told Open Doors he was fired from his company after discussing his faith with his coworkers. NGOs reported continuing societal discrimination against Christians in their personal and professional lives, and converts experienced pressure from family members to return to Buddhist beliefs and customs.

The United States does not have formal diplomatic relations with Bhutan or a diplomatic presence in the country. During periodic visits, officers from the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi engaged with a wide range of both government and nongovernment figures, including on issues relating to freedom of religious practice and treatment of religious minorities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 766,000 (July 2018 estimate). According to a 2010 report by the Pew Research Center, approximately 75 percent of the population follows the Drukpa Kagyu or Nyingma schools of Buddhism. Hindus are approximately 22 percent of the total population and reside mostly in southern areas.

According to the Pew Research Center and the Open Doors World Watch List, estimates of the size of the Christian community range from the low thousands to 20,000. Most Christians are concentrated in towns in the south and are of Nepali origin. Although traditional Bon practices are often combined with Buddhist practices, very few citizens adhere exclusively to this religious tradition, according to scholars. 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.

Media continued to report there were more than 53,000 foreign workers in the country, most from India. India's Ministry of External Affairs said as of January there were approximately 60,000 Indian nationals living in Bhutan for construction-related labor, as well as between 8,000 and 10,000 workers crossing into and out of the country on a daily basis. While there is no data on their religious affiliation, most 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 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.

The law requires religious groups to register with the CRO. To register, a religious group must submit an application demonstrating its leaders are citizens and disclose their educational background and financial assets. The law also specifies the organizational structure, bylaws, and procedural rules registered religious organizations must follow. The law 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. The law mandates the CRO certify that religious groups applying for registration meet the requirements specified in the law.

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

Unregistered religious groups may not organize publicly, own property, raise funds, conduct outreach activities, or import literature. According to the law, these activities are subject to penalties ranging from fines to prison terms, depending on the offense. Unregistered religious groups may hold private worship services in homes. 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 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 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, currently the minister of home and cultural affairs. 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 as an ex-officio secretary. Heads of Buddhist religious bodies and the Hindu Dharma Samudaya 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 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 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 Bhutanese architectural standards. The CRO determines conformity with these standards.

The constitution states religious institutions have the responsibility to ensure religion remains separate from the state. It also 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 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

NGO representatives, including the Alliance Defending Freedom, expressed continued concern over the lack of a clear definition in the constitution and legal code for terms such as “inducement” to religious conversion, which they indicated was tantamount to anticonversion legislation. They stated this lack of clarity continued to put the religious activities of minority religious groups at risk, citing religious teaching, charitable services, and public education as examples of activities the government could penalize. The NGO representatives said the potential existed for arbitrary government action; however, there were no reports during the year the government used the law in a punitive fashion, and surreptitious religious conversions from Buddhism to other religions continued. Open Doors listed the country on its World Watch List, stating the government was intent on maintaining a strong national identity and unity by suppressing outside influences, including Christianity.

According to Open Doors, churches that previously applied for registration continued to await a response from the CRO. The Hindu Dharma Samudaya remained the only registered non-Buddhist religious group, out of 110 registered groups. During the year, the government registered an additional 15 Buddhist groups. Christian groups attempting to register on multiple occasions in the past also received no official response, according to previous information from local Christians. They said the lack of registration meant they continued not to be able to raise funds and to have their legality questioned at the district and village levels. Open Doors reported cases of Christian farmers being excluded from participating in communal planting and harvesting activities. Christian groups reported the government continued to provide preferential treatment to Buddhist groups for financial support.

Unregistered religious groups continued to worship in private, according to one foreign pastor who mentioned receiving some reports of increased tolerance of Christian services by authorities. The groups, however, remained unable to exercise certain rights such as property ownership. Members of the Christian community continued to report holding religious meetings discreetly in private facilities. The foreign pastor reported that some Christians living close to the country’s border traveled to India for worship. Open Doors reported that a church building was locked up and another demolished.

Open Doors reported that a Christian man was denied a government identification card because his Christian mother refused to renounce her faith in the registration process. Christians previously reported they often faced difficulty or failed to obtain a “non-objection certificate” from local authorities, required for loan and employment applications, property registration, and the renewal of identification cards.

The government continued its financial assistance for the construction of Buddhist temples and shrines, as well as funding for Buddhist monks and monasteries. In a June speech, the then prime minister reported the government completed construction of a Buddhist college and a Hindu temple and that two other Hindu temples were under construction in Thimphu and Gelephu.

NGOs reported compulsory Buddhist daily prayer sessions in schools continued. Children of Christian families faced discrimination from teachers and sometimes were denied access to schools, according to the NGOs. Open Doors reported one student was kept from graduating from school because she was a Christian.

Courts and some other government institutions remained housed within or adjacent to Buddhist monasteries. Some religious groups previously stated government ceremonies continued to involve mandatory Buddhist prayer rituals. According to an NGO, there was continued pressure on non-Buddhists in civil service positions to participate in Buddhist rites and contribute to festivals.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

NGOs reported continuing societal pressure on individuals to participate in Buddhist traditions and practices. Open Doors said Christians faced discrimination in their personal and professional lives and rated persecution of Christians as “very high.” One Christian said he was fired from his company after discussing his faith with coworkers. According to Open Doors, converts experienced pressure from family members to return to Buddhist beliefs and customs. The group further stated converts faced surveillance by religious leaders and their communities, hindering the free expression and practice of their religious practices.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The United States does not have a diplomatic presence in the country and does not maintain formal diplomatic relations with the government. During periodic visits,

officers from the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi engaged with a wide range of both government and nongovernment figures, including on issues relating to freedom of religious practice and treatment of religious minorities.