Mongolia

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice; however, the law limits proselytizing, and some religious groups faced bureaucratic harassment or were denied registration.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. In particular, the U.S. Government urged the Government to investigate and correct the difficulties some religious organizations experience in registering.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 604,247 square miles and a population of 2.6 million. Buddhism and the country's traditions are closely tied, and almost all ethnic Mongolians (93 percent of the population) practice some form of Buddhism. Lamaist Buddhism of the Tibetan variety is the traditional and dominant religion.

When socialist controls on religion and on the country's traditions ended in 1990, interest in the practice of Buddhism grew. The Buddhist community is not homogeneous, and there are several competing schools.

Kazakhs, most of whom are Muslim, are the largest ethnic minority, constituting approximately 4 percent of the population nationwide and 85 percent in the western province, Bayan-Olgiy. Kazakhs operate Islamic schools for their children. They sometimes receive financial assistance from religious organizations in Kazakhstan and Turkey.

There is a small number of Christians, including Roman Catholics, Russian Orthodox, and Protestants. In the capital, Ulaanbaatar, approximately 30,000 citizens, or 3 percent of the registered population of the city, practice Christianity.

Some citizens practice shamanism, but there are no reliable statistics on their number.

Missionaries are present in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice; however, the law limits proselytizing, and some religious groups seeking registration face burdensome bureaucratic requirements and lengthy delays. The Constitution explicitly recognizes the separation of church and state.

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

A religious group must register with the Ministry of Justice and Home Affairs, a decentralized and bureaucratic process, in order to legally function as an organization. Religious institutions must reregister annually. The law allows the Government to supervise and limit the number of places of worship and number of clergy. The Government used the registration process as a mechanism to limit the number of places for religious worship; however, there were no reports that it limited the number of clergy during the reporting period.

Groups must provide the following documentation when registering: a letter to the national ministry 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 the founding of the local group, a list of leaders or officers, brief biographic information on the person wishing to conduct religious services, and the expected number of worshippers. The Ulaanbaatar City Council and other local legislative bodies require similar documentation prior to granting approval to conduct religious services. While the Ministry of Justice and Home Affairs possesses the ultimate authority to approve an organization's application, this appears to be largely pro forma. In practice local legislative bodies assess the applications.

The registration process is decentralized with several layers of bureaucracy and, under the best of circumstances, can take months to complete. Registration with the Ministry of Justice and Home Affairs in the capital may not be sufficient if a group intends to work in the countryside where local registration is also necessary. Throughout the country, there were 391 registered places of worship, including 217 Buddhist, 143 Christian, 5 Baha'i, 24 Muslim, and 2 shamanistic. During the period covered by this report, the Ministry registered 16 new Christian churches, 11 Buddhist temples, 19 Moslem mosques and 2 shaman temples. In Ulaanbaatar, the registration of one Buddhist and three Christian religious organizations which own a temple and three churches, respectively, remained under consideration.

Religious instruction is not permitted in public schools. There is a school to train Buddhist lamas in Ulaanbaatar.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

While the law does not prohibit proselytizing by registered religious groups, it limits such activity by forbidding spreading religious views to nonbelievers by "force, pressure, material incentives, deception, or means which harm health or morals or are psychologically damaging." There were no instances of prosecutions under this law during the reporting period. A Ministry of Education directive bans mixing foreign language or other training with religious teaching or instruction. Monitoring of the ban, particularly in the capital area, is strict. There were no reported violations of the ban in recent years. Religious groups that violate the law may not receive an extension of their registration. If individuals violate the law, the Government may ask their employers to terminate their employment. No such cases were reported during the reporting period. Registration and reregistration are burdensome for all religious groups. The length and documentation requirements of the process discourage some organizations from applying. Some Christian groups stated that local officials believed there were "too many" churches, or that there should at least be parity in the registration of new Buddhist temples and new Christian churches. No churches were known to have been refused registration in Ulaanbaatar during the reporting period; the applications of four religious organizations remained under consideration.

Authorities in Tuv aimag (province), near Ulaanbaatar, routinely denied registration to churches. There are currently no churches registered in the aimag, and several churches were again denied registration during the reporting period. A nongovernmental organization (NGO) filed a formal complaint with the National Human Rights Commission in May 2007 concerning the refusal by Tuv aimag authorities to register Christian churches. In June 2007 the Commission wrote to the Tuv aimag legislative body stating that the body's actions were in violation of the Constitution. Until the past year, almost all mosques throughout the country were registered as branches of one central Islamic organization. However, during the reporting period the Ministry of Justice and Home Affairs clarified that each mosque needed to seek additional approvals from local authorities in their areas. This separate registration generally proceeded smoothly. However, one mosque in Darkhan-Uul aimag was told that the aimag legislature had approved its application, but it did not receive documentation, leaving it unable to register with the Ministry of Justice and Home Affairs.

Unregistered religious institutions are often able to function in practice but potentially face difficulties with authorities and are unable to sponsor foreign clergy for visas. Visa problems especially affect Christian churches, many of which depend on foreign clergy.

The Muslim community in Ulaanbaatar reported that authorities were helpful in assisting its efforts to construct a mosque, including donating a piece of land for the site.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees 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 of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice in the period covered by this report. Citizens generally were tolerant of the beliefs of others; however, because in the past humanitarian assistance was accompanied by proselytizing activity, there was some friction between foreign Christian missionary groups and citizens. Some social conservatives have criticized foreign influences on youth and children, including foreign religions and the alleged use of material incentives to attract converts.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. embassy officials discussed with authorities registration difficulties encountered by Christian groups. These discussions focused attention on U.S. Government concern for religious freedom and resulted in clarification of the requirements for registration. Embassy officials also continued to discuss registration requirements with local faith-based NGOs and urged the National Human Rights Commission to investigate and correct registration problems.

The Embassy maintains contact with the local offices of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights and the U.N. Development Program to discuss religious freedom and other human rights issues.

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