U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Mongolia

International Religious Freedom Report 2006
Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

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 during the period covered by this report.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues 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 its population is approximately 2.83 million. Buddhism and the country's traditions are tied closely, and almost all ethnic Mongolians (93 percent of the population) practiced 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, active interest in the practice of Buddhism grew. The Buddhist community was not homogeneous, and there were several competing schools.

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

Although nationwide statistics were lacking, there was a small number of Christians, including Roman Catholics, Russian Orthodox, and Protestants. In the capital, Ulaanbaatar, approximately thirty thousand citizens, or 3 percent of the registered population of the city, practiced Christianity.

Some citizens practiced shamanism, but there were no reliable statistics on their number.

Foreign missionary groups included Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, evangelical Protestants, Mormons (the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and Baha'is.

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 that seek to register faced 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 otherwise did not 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 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 possesses the ultimate authority to approve an organization's application, this appears to be largely pro forma. In practice local assemblies 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. There were 357 registered places of worship, including 206 Buddhist, 127 Christian, 5 Baha'i, and 5 Muslim. During the period covered by this report, twelve new Christian churches and two Buddhist temples were registered in Ulaanbaatar.

Contacts with coreligionists outside the country are allowed. In 1993 the Government abolished legal restrictions on such contacts, and human rights sources stated that there were no de facto efforts to restrict normal contacts and interchange.

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 the use of material incentives, pressure, or deceptive methods to introduce religion. 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.

Registration and reregistration are burdensome for all religious groups. The length and documentation requirements of the process discourage some organizations from applying. Others can take years to win approval. 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. One church, approved in May 2006, had been pursuing registration since 2003. City authorities approved twelve churches in May 2006. No churches were known to have been refused registration in Ulaanbaatar during the reporting period. Although a nongovernmental organization (NGO) previously reported that government officials had stated that sixty Christian churches registered in Ulaanbaatar were sufficient, there were no similar reported statements during the reporting period.

Christian groups previously reported that authorities in Tov aimag (province), near Ulaanbaatar, routinely denied registration to churches. In December 2005 the aimag legislative body denied registration to eight churches on the same day it approved two Buddhist temples. No churches were registered in the aimag.

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. In March 2006 government officials warned three unregistered churches in Tov aimag and one in Selenge aimag to cease their activities. Visa problems especially affect Christian churches, many of which depend on foreign clergy. During the registration process in Ulaanbaatar, in past years some groups encountered demands by midlevel city officials for money or charitable activities in their district; however, no such demands were reported in recent years.

Ulaanbaatar authorities were reportedly helpful in assisting the Muslim community in the capital in 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 Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Citizens generally were tolerant of the beliefs of others, and there were no reports of religiously motivated violence; however, because in the past humanitarian assistance was accompanied by proselytizing activity, there was some friction between Christian missionary groups and citizens. Some conservatives have criticized foreign influences on youth and children, including foreign religions and the alleged use of material incentives to attract believers.

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. concern for religious freedom and opposition to corruption; the discussions resulted in a clarification of the requirements for registration. Embassy officials also continued to discuss registration requirements with faith-based NGOs.

The U.S. embassy maintains regular contact with Buddhist, Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, and Mormon religious groups. In addition the

embassy met with representatives of U.S.-based religious and humanitarian organizations. 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.

Released on September 15, 2006

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