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2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom: Mongolia

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MONGOLIA

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, proselytizing is limited by forbidding the use of incentives, pressure, or deceptive methods.

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

Relations between the various religious communities are amicable. However, some conservative elements of society resent foreign interference in the form of religion. Government limits on proselytizing and bureaucratic harassment of groups that seek to register hinder the free practice of religion.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religion, the right both to worship and not to worship, and the Government generally respects these provisions in practice; however, the law limits proselytizing, and some groups that sought to register have faced bureaucratic harassment. The Constitution explicitly recognizes the separation of church and state. The law regulating the relationship between church and state was passed in 1993 and amended in 1995. While the Ministry of Justice is responsible for registrations, local assemblies have the authority to approve applications at the local level.

Although there is no official state religion, traditionalists believe that Buddhism is the "natural religion" of the country. The Government has contributed to the restoration of several Buddhist sites. These are important religious, historical, and cultural centers. The Government does not subsidize the Buddhist religion otherwise.

Under the provisions of the law, the Government may supervise and limit the numbers of both places of worship and clergy for organized religions, but there were no reports that it has done so. However, religious groups must register with the Ministry of Justice. Some groups encountered harassment during the registration process, including random demands by midlevel city officials for financial contributions in return for securing legal status. Even when registration was completed, the same authorities threatened some

religious groups with withdrawal of approval. The registration process is decentralized with several layers of bureaucracy, in which officials sometimes demand financial benefits in exchange for authorization. Additionally, registration in the capital may not be sufficient if a group intends to work in the countryside where local registration also is necessary. In general it appears that difficulties in registering primarily are the consequence of bureaucratic action by local officials and attempts to extort financial assistance for projects not funded by the city. Of the 260 temples and churches founded in the past 10 years, about 150 are registered, including 90 Buddhist, 40 Christian, and 4 Baha'i, in addition to 1 Muslim mosque and other organizations.

Religious Demography

Buddhism and Mongolian traditions are tied closely, and it appears likely that 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, but this circumstance does not adversely affect religious freedom for others. Since the end of Socialist controls on religion and Mongolian traditions in 1990, active interest in and practice of Buddhism has grown. The Buddhist community is not completely homogenous, and there are several competing schools, including a small group that believes that the sutras should be in the Mongolian language and that all religious clergy should be Mongolian. However, the rivalry between the schools has not affected religious freedom, nor is it a matter of public concern.

Kazakhs are the largest of the ethnic minorities, constituting approximately 4 percent of the population nationwide and 85 percent of the population of the western province, Bayan-Olgii. Most Kazakhs are practicing Muslims. The Kazakhs freely worship and run Islamic schools for their children. They sometimes receive financial assistance from religious organizations in Kazakhstan and Turkey. Their status as a majority in Bayan-Olgii was established in the former Socialist period and continues in much the same circumstances.

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The law does not prohibit proselytizing, but limits it by forbidding use of incentives, pressure, or deceptive methods to introduce religion. With the opening of the country following the 1990 democratic changes, religious groups began to arrive to provide humanitarian assistance and open new churches. Some friction between missionary groups and citizens developed because this assistance was mixed with proselytizing activities. Proselytizing by registered religious groups is allowed, although a Ministry of Education directive bans mixing foreign language or other training with religious teaching or instruction. The edict is enforced, particularly in the capital area. Contacts with coreligionists outside the country are allowed.

Foreign missionaries include Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, various evangelical Protestant groups, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, and adherents of the Baha'i Faith. Some of these groups are still in the process of registering with the Ministry of Justice; the process is protracted for some groups, but others are registered quickly. Religious groups are being granted the right to hold church services and have their own church buildings in addition to operating charitable institutions.

There are no government-sponsored ecumenical activities.

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

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners. A report that in April 2000 a Christian in Bayan-Olgii (a predominantly Muslim province) was imprisoned for distributing religious material was determined to be false.

Forced Religious Conversions of Minor U.S. Citizens

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

Relations between the various religious communities are amicable, but there are no significant ecumenical movements or interfaith dialog. Citizens generally are tolerant of the beliefs of others, and there were no reports of religiously motivated violence, although there has been some friction between missionary groups and citizens because humanitarian assistance in the past was mixed with proselytizing activity (see Section I). Some conservatives have criticized foreign influences on youth and children, including religion and the use of incentives to attract believers.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. Embassy officials have discussed with midlevel bureaucrats specific registration difficulties encountered by Christian churches. These discussions focused attention on U.S. concern for religious freedom and opposition to corruption; they resulted in a clarification of the requirements for registration.

When draft amendments to the law that would have limited religious freedom were circulated by the Ministry of Justice in the fall of 1999, the Embassy made official demarches to the Government, informally discussed U.S. concerns with key legislators, and coordinated a response with other embassies and multilateral organizations. Subsequently the Government did not consider these amendments.

The U.S. Embassy maintains regular contact with Buddhist leaders. Additionally, embassy officials have met with representatives of U.S.-based religious and humanitarian organizations. The Embassy also maintains contact with the staff of the local office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to discuss human rights and religious freedom.

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