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Bhutan

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. Mahayana Buddhism is the state's "spiritual heritage," although in the southern areas many citizens openly practiced Hinduism.

The country is a democratic constitutional monarchy. The constitution mandates that the king, the Druk Gyalpo, be the "protector of all religions" in the country.

While subtle pressure on non-Buddhists to observe traditional Drukpa values and some limitations on constructing non-Buddhist religious buildings remained, the government took steps to improve respect for religious freedom. There were no instances of the government barring non-Buddhist missionaries from entering the country.

There were no verified reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Societal pressures toward non-Buddhists were reflected in official and unofficial efforts to uphold the "spiritual heritage" of the country.

There are no formal diplomatic relations between the United States and the government; however, there is cordial and ongoing interaction, and 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 18,146 square miles and a population of 700,000, according to government publications. Two-thirds to three-quarters of the population practices Drukpa Kagyupa or Nyingmapa Buddhism, both of which are disciplines of Mahayana Buddhism. Approximately one-quarter of the population is ethnic Nepalese and practices Hinduism. Christians, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, and nonreligious groups comprise less than 1 percent of the population.

Ethnic Ngalops, descendants of Tibetan immigrants, compose the majority of the population in the western and central areas and mostly follow Drukpa Kargyupa.

Ethnic Sarchops, descendants of the country's probable original inhabitants, live in the east. Reportedly, some Sarchops practice Buddhism combined with elements of the Bön tradition (Animism) and Hinduism. Several Sarchops held high

positions in the government, the national assembly, and the court system. The government supported both Kagyupa and Ningmapa Buddhist monasteries. The royal family practiced a combination of Ningmapa and Kagyupa Buddhism, and many citizens believe in the concept of Kanyin-Zungdrel, meaning "Kagyupa and Ningmapa as one."

Bön, the country's animist and shamanistic belief system, revolves around the worship of nature and predates Buddhism. Although Bön priests often officiated and included Bön rituals in Buddhist festivals, very few citizens adhered exclusively to this religious group.

Hindus, mainly in the south, followed the Shaivaite, Vaishnavite, Shakta, Ganapathi, Puranic, and Vedic schools. Hindu temples existed in Thimphu and southern areas, and Hindus practice their religious beliefs in small-to-medium sized groups.

Christians were present throughout the country in very small numbers. There was reportedly one building dedicated to Christian worship in the south, the only area with a sufficiently large congregation to sustain a church; elsewhere, Christian families and individuals practiced their religious beliefs at home.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) claimed the government discouraged open worship by both large and small gatherings. International Christian relief organizations and Catholic Jesuit priests engaged in education and humanitarian activities.

Section II. Status of 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. The constitution stipulates, It also states, "no one shall be discriminated against on the grounds of race, sex, language, religion, politics, or other status."

Mahayana Buddhism is the state's "spiritual heritage."

While the constitution does not restrict the right to convert or proselytize, some NGOs alleged the government limited this right in practice by restricting the construction of non-Buddhist religious buildings and the celebration of some non-Buddhist religious festivals.

The National Security Act (NSA) prohibits "words either spoken or written, or by other means whatsoever, that promote or attempt to promote, on grounds of religion, race, language, caste, or community, or on any other ground whatsoever, feelings of enmity or hatred between different religious, racial, or language groups or castes and communities." Violating the NSA is punishable by up to three years' imprisonment; it is not known whether any cases have been prosecuted under the act.

There are no laws against publishing religious material.

An annual government grant financed the country's Monastic Body of 3,500 monks. By statute 10 seats in the 150-seat national assembly and two seats on the 11-member Royal Advisory Council were reserved for Buddhist monks, out of respect for the country's tradition of Buddhist spiritual oversight. There were no religious stipulations on the remaining seats. Many non-Buddhists worked for the government. The Special Commission for Cultural Affairs, with a Hindu priest as a member, also advised on religious matters.

The 1980 Marriage Act, as amended in 1996, addresses questions of family law such as marriage, divorce, adoption, and child custody. Traditionally, Buddhists and Hindus have resolved questions of family law according to their religion;

however, this approach is changing as the country takes steps to strengthen its formal legal system. The country's legal system is based on customary law and Buddhist precepts.

The government subsidized Buddhist monasteries and shrines and provided aid to approximately one-third of the kingdom's 12,000 monks. The government committed to providing this support as a result of the 1956 land reform program, which stripped the monastic establishment of wide tracts of fertile land for redistribution among the landless.

The government observed major Buddhist holy days as national holidays. The king declared one major Hindu festival to be a national holiday, and the royal family participated in it.

NGO representatives living outside the country claimed that only Drukpa Kagyupa and Nyingmapa Buddhist religious teaching were permitted in schools and that Buddhist prayer was compulsory in all government-run schools. The government contended that there was no religious curriculum in educational institutions in the country. Buddhist teaching was permitted only in monastic schools; religious teaching was forbidden in other schools. Local NGO interlocutors confirmed that although students took part in a prayer session each morning, it was nondenominational and not compulsory.

The government required all citizens to wear traditional dress in certain public places such as Buddhist religious buildings, government offices, and schools, and for certain public functions and ceremonies. The law provides for a fine or imprisonment for violations. Some citizens commented that enforcement was arbitrary and sporadic. The government asserted that this requirement was intended to preserve the country's cultural integrity.

The government continued issuing new national identity (ID) cards to citizens meeting at least one of three strict criteria: birth, registration, and naturalization. Human rights organizations alleged that large sections of the country's population were deemed ineligible for national ID cards. Persons holding residential permits, marriage certificate cards (those married to citizens), and limited duration certificates were not eligible to receive the new ID card. The wives of citizens married from outside the country and children born of such parents were not granted citizenship. The government indicated that ethnic Nepalese who have family members living in refugee camps in Nepal would be eligible; however, reports suggested that this regulation has not been implemented.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. While subtle pressure on non-Buddhists to observe the traditional Drukpa values and some limitations on constructing non-Buddhists religious buildings remained, the government took steps to improve respect for religious freedom. There were no reported instances of the government barring non-Buddhist missionaries from entering the country.

According to some NGOs, the teaching of Nepali and Sanskrit continued to be banned in the country. The government indicated that the teaching of any language was permitted; however, Nepali and Sanskrit were not part of the curriculum in formal schools.

Followers of religions other than Buddhism and Hinduism generally were free to worship in private homes, but NGOs alleged they were prohibited from erecting religious buildings or congregating in public. Conversions to Christianity took place, but some Christian groups claimed that religious meetings must be held discreetly, especially in rural areas, for fear of the authorities, and that religious practice was restricted to the confines of their homes. They also alleged that the official government record does not allow them to note their religious affiliation as Christianity. The government denied this accusation.

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Despite the constitution's provision for freedom of religion, some Christian groups claimed that the publication of Bibles and the building of Christian schools remain prohibited.

No new buildings, including places of worship, can be constructed without government licenses. Reports by ethnic Nepalese citizens suggested this process favored Buddhist over Hindu temples. The government provided financial assistance for the construction of Buddhist temples and shrines and funding for monks and monasteries. NGOs alleged that the government rarely granted permission to build Hindu temples; the last report of such construction was in the early 1990s, when the government authorized the construction and renovation of Hindu temples and centers of Sanskrit and Hindu learning and provided state funds to help finance the projects. The government argued that it was a matter of supply and demand, with demand for Buddhist temples far exceeding that for Hindu temples. The government stated that it supported numerous Hindu temples in the south where most Hindus reside and provided some scholarships for Hindus to study Sanskrit in India.

Certain senior civil servants, regardless of religious identity, were required to take an oath of allegiance to the king, the country, and the people. The oath does not have religious content, but a Buddhist lama administers it.

Dissidents alleged that applicants have been asked their religious identity before receiving government services.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, many ethnic Nepalese residents, a majority of them Hindu, were forcibly expelled or voluntarily left as a result of discrimination. The government claimed they were illegal immigrants with no right to citizenship or residency. Some of those expelled asserted the right of return. While the government accepted that at least a few hundred had a legitimate claim to citizenship, it did not permit them to return. More than 70,000 persons remained in refugee camps in eastern Nepal. (For a more detailed discussion, see U.S. Department of State's 2009 Country Report on Human Rights Practices.) The government resettled citizens from other parts of the country on government-owned land in the south vacated by the expelled ethnic Nepalese. Human rights groups maintained this action prejudiced any possibility of land restoration to returning refugees. The government contended this was not its first resettlement program and that in the past it had resettled some ethnic Nepalese citizens from the south to other areas.

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

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no verified reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Societal pressures toward non-Buddhists were reflected in official and unofficial efforts to uphold the "spiritual heritage" of the country. While there were no reports of the repetition of the excesses of the late 1980s and early 1990s, societal pressure for conformity with Drukpa Kagyupa norms was prevalent.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

There are no formal diplomatic relations between the U.S. and the government. U.S. officials discuss human rights issues, including religious freedom, during their meetings with officials, including those based in the country's embassy in New Delhi. During these exchanges U.S. officials discussed governmental discrimination against the ethnic Nepalese minority.

Periodically throughout the reporting period, U.S. officials visiting Thimphu discussed religious freedom with the government in the context of refugee problems and the constitution. U.S. officials stressed the importance of constitutional provisions for religious freedom and the protection of minority populations. The officials also reiterated the importance of finding a lasting solution for the mostly Hindu refugees in Nepal to demonstrate the government's commitment to religious tolerance.

The U.S. government also worked to promote religious freedom and other democratic values by sponsoring travel of several citizens to the United States under the International Visitors, Humphrey, and Fulbright programs.

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