



Bhutan

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The law provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government limited this right in practice by barring non-Buddhist missionaries from entering the country, limiting construction of non-Buddhist religious buildings, and restricting the celebration of some non-Buddhist religious festivals. Mahayana Buddhism is the state religion, although in the southern areas many citizens openly practice Hinduism. The draft Constitution due to be implemented in 2008 would protect freedom of religion, stating that "a Bhutanese citizen shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion."

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report. There were no reports of violence associated with pressure to conform to Mahayana beliefs.

There were no reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

There are no formal diplomatic relations between the United States and the country; however, there is cordial and ongoing bilateral interaction, and the U.S. Government discussed 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 18,146 square miles and a population of 672,000, according to the 2005 census. Approximately two-thirds to three-quarters of the population practice Drukpa Kagyupa or Ningmapa Buddhism, both of which are disciplines of Mahayana Buddhism. Approximately one-quarter of the population is ethnic Nepalese and practice Hinduism. Christians both Roman Catholic and Protestant and nonreligious groups comprised less than 1 percent of the population.

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

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 whereas others follow Animism and Hinduism. Several Sarchops held high positions in the Government, the National Assembly, and the court system.

The Government supports both Kagyupa and Ningmapa Buddhist monasteries. The royal family practices 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 adhere exclusively to this religious group.

Hindus, mainly in the South, follow the Shaivite, Vaishnavite, Shakta, Ghanapathi, Puranic, and Vedic schools. Hindu temples exist in Thimphu and southern areas, and Hindus practice their religion in small to medium-sized groups.

Christians are present throughout the country in very small numbers. There was reportedly only 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 practice their religion at home. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) claimed the Government discouraged open worship by large and small gatherings. There were no Christian missionaries in the country.

International Christian relief organizations and Roman Catholic Jesuit priests engaged in education and humanitarian activities.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The law provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government limited this right in practice. In 2005 the Government released to the public a draft Constitution stipulating freedom of religion as a fundamental right. Throughout the reporting period, the country continued to lay the groundwork for its transition to a parliamentary democracy in 2008, including the implementation of the draft Constitution.

Mahayana Buddhism is the state religion. The Government discouraged both large and small religious gatherings of non-Buddhists, did not allow construction of non-Buddhist places of worship, and did not allow non-Buddhist missionaries to work in the country.

No new buildings, including new places of worship, can be constructed without licenses.

While the current Constitution does not restrict the right to convert or proselytize, proselytism is prohibited based on a Royal Government decision. Forced conversion is addressed in the draft Constitution. Article 7 states: "No person shall be compelled to belong to another faith by means of coercion or inducement."

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 with up to 3 years' imprisonment although it is not clear that the Government has enforced this provision of the act.

There are no laws against publishing religious material.

An annual government grant finances the country's Monastic Body of 3,500 monks. By statute, 10 seats in the 150-seat National Assembly and 2 seats on the 11-member Royal Advisory Council are reserved for Buddhist monks out of respect for the country's tradition of Buddhist spiritual oversight. There are no religious stipulations on the remaining seats. Many non-Buddhists work for the Government. The Special Commission for Cultural Affairs, with a Hindu priest as a member, also advises on religious matters.

The Marriage Act of 1980, as amended in 1996, addresses questions of family law subjects such as marriage, divorce, adoption, and child custody. Traditionally, Buddhists and Hindus have resolved questions of family law according to their religion; however, this is changing as the country takes steps to strengthen its legal system. The country's evolving legal system is based on customary law and Buddhist precepts.

The Government subsidizes Buddhist monasteries and shrines and provides 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.

Major Buddhist holy days are state holidays. The King declared one major Hindu festival as a national holiday, and the royal family participated in it.

NGO representatives living outside the country and dissidents reported that only Drukpa Kagyupa and Ningmapa Buddhist religious teaching was permitted in schools and that Buddhist prayer was compulsory in all government run schools. The Government contended that there was no religious curriculum in modern 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 requires all citizens to wear the traditional dress in public places; however, it only strictly enforced this law for visits to Buddhist religious buildings, monasteries, government offices, schools, and for attendance at official functions and public ceremonies. Some citizens commented that enforcement of this law was arbitrary and sporadic.

The Government continued issuing new national identity cards to "genuine" Bhutanese. People holding residential permits,

marriage certificate cards (those married to Bhutanese) and time-bound certificates were not eligible to receive the new ID card. The Government also indicated that ethnic Nepalese who have family members living in refugee camps in Nepal would be eligible. However, reports suggested that this had yet to be implemented.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Followers of religious groups other than Buddhism and Hinduism generally were free to worship in private homes, but NGOs alleged that they were prohibited from erecting religious buildings or congregating in public. Some Christian groups reported that religious meetings must be held discreetly, especially in rural areas, for fear of the authorities. There is reportedly one building used for Christian worship in the south.

No new buildings, including places of worship, can be constructed without government licenses. Reports by ethnic Nepalese citizens suggested that this process favored Buddhist temples over Hindu ones. The Government provided financial assistance for the construction of Buddhist temples and shrines and state 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 religion, are 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 religion before receiving government services.

Unlike previous years, there were no reports of promotion denials to some of the handful of Christians in government service.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, many ethnic Nepalese residents, a majority of whom were 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 have a legitimate claim to citizenship, it has not permitted them to return. More than 100,000 people remained in refugee camps in Eastern Nepal. (For a more detailed discussion, see the 2006 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 that this action prejudiced any possibility of land restoration to returning refugees. The Government maintained that this was not its first resettlement program and that ethnic Nepalese citizens from the south sometimes were resettled in other areas.

In January 2006 authorities arrested two civil servants in the village of Nago in Paro District, accusing them of engaging in acts of proselytism under the false pretext of holding an official meeting, maligning the Spiritual Head of Bhutan, posing as officials on official business, and giving false information. In accordance with provisions in the Bhutan Penal Code and the National Security Act, both men were found guilty in a district court. Christian groups maintained the men were arrested due to their religious beliefs since, according to these groups, the men were arrested while showing a Christian film in a Buddhist home. They were sentenced in early June 2006 in an open trial with a public hearing to three and a half years and three years in prison. They did not appeal the court judgment, although the right to appeal was provided for by law. On July 28, 2006, both men were released after payment of a fine.

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 no reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious belief or practice. Societal pressures toward non-Buddhists were reflected in official and unofficial efforts to impose the dress and cultural norms of the Buddhist majority on all citizens. While there were no reports of the repetition of the excesses of the late 1980s and early 1990s, societal and governmental pressure for conformity with Drukpa Kagyupa norms was prevalent.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

There are no formal diplomatic relations between the United States and the country. Informal contacts between the two governments took place frequently. During these exchanges, U.S. officials discussed governmental discrimination against the ethnic Nepalese minority.

Periodically throughout the reporting period, officers from the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi discussed religious freedom issues with the Government in Thimphu in the context of refugee problems and the 2005 draft Constitution. During meetings, officials discussed the draft Constitution, including the inclusion of guarantees of religious freedom and protection for minority populations. The officials also reiterated the importance of finding a lasting solution for the mostly Hindu refugees in Nepal in order 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.

Released on September 14, 2007

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