



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Bhutan

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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 and mostly freely practice Hinduism. The draft constitution, introduced in March 2005, guarantees freedom of religion but had not been adopted by the end of the period covered by this report.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Pressure for conformity with Mahayana Buddhist norms was reinforced through the requirement that citizens wear the traditional dress of the ethnic Ngalops, who are predominantly Buddhist, in all government buildings, monasteries, and schools. There were no reports of violence associated with pressure to conform to Mahayana norms.

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

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 informally 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 according to the May 2005 nationwide census, the population was 552,996. Approximately two-thirds to three-quarters of the population practiced Drukpa Kagyupa or Ningmapa Buddhism, both of which are disciplines of Mahayana Buddhism. Approximately one-quarter of the population was ethnic Nepalese who practiced Hinduism. Christians, both Catholic and Protestant combined, comprised a fraction of 1 percent of the population.

The Drukpa discipline was practiced predominantly in the western and central parts of the country, although there were adherents in other regions.

Ethnic Ngalops, descendants of Tibetan immigrants, comprised the majority of the population in the western and central parts of the country. The Ngalops predominated in government and the civil service, and the monarchy decreed their cultural norms and dress to be the standard for all citizens.

The Ningmapa school of Mahayana Buddhism was practiced predominantly in the eastern region of the country, although there were also adherents in other areas. Most living in the east were ethnic Sarchops, descendants of those thought to be the country's original inhabitants. Several Sarchops held high positions in the Government, the national assembly, and the court system.

The Government supports both Kagyupa and Ningmapa 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."

The country's animist and shamanistic faith called Bon revolves around the worship of nature and predates Buddhism. Although Bon priests were found and Bon rituals sometimes were included in Buddhist festivals, very few citizens adhered to this faith exclusively.

The Shaivite, Vaishnavite, Shakta, Ghanapathi, Puranic, and Vedic schools were represented among Hindus mainly in the south. Hindu temples existed in the southern part of the country, and Hindus were allowed to practice their religion in small- to medium-sized groups.

Christians were present throughout the country in very small numbers. There was reportedly only one building dedicated for Christian worship in the south, the only location where there was a sufficiently large concentration of Christians to sustain a church. Elsewhere, Christian families and individuals were free to practice their religion at home, although nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) claimed that the Government discouraged open worship and both large and small gatherings. There were no Christian missionaries operating in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The law provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government limited this right in practice. NGOs reported that the Government discouraged both large and small religious gatherings of non-Buddhists, did not allow construction of churches or non-Buddhist temples, and did not allow non-Buddhist missionaries to work in the country. Mahayana Buddhism is the state religion. Proselytism by other faiths is illegal under the Bhutanese National Security Act.

The country's Monastic Body of 3,500 monks was financed by an annual government grant and was the sole arbiter on religious matters. The body also played an advisory role to the national assembly, the Royal Advisory Council, and the king, who consistently deferred to its pronouncements on almost all religious matters and some decisions affecting the state. 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. 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 advised on religious matters.

Questions on family law subjects such as marriage, divorce, adoption, and child custody were addressed under the Marriage Act of 1980, as amended in 1996. Traditionally, Buddhists and Hindus have resolved questions of family law according to the citizen's religion, but this is changing. In 2005, a Christian group in the country reported in 2005 that family law concerns for all citizens, regardless of religion, were resolved according to Buddhist precepts. The country's evolving 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 thousand monks. The Government stated that it provides this support because its land reform program carried out in 1956 stripped the monastic establishment of wide tracts of fertile land for redistribution among the landless. In exchange, the Royal Government committed to provide financial support for the monasteries.

Major Buddhist holy days were state holidays. The king declared one major Hindu festival as a national holiday, and the royal family participated in it; however, there were no Hindu temples in the capital city of Thimphu, despite the migration of many ethnic Nepalese to the city.

NGO representatives living outside the country and dissidents reported that only Drukpa Kagyupa and Ningmapa Buddhist religious teaching is permitted in schools and that Buddhist prayer is compulsory in all government-run schools. The Government contended that Buddhist teaching is permitted only in monastic schools and that religious teaching is forbidden in other schools. Bhutan-based 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, when in public places, to wear the traditional dress of the Ngalop majority; 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.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Followers of religions 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. In 2004 an NGO reported that some Christians did not worship openly for fear of discrimination; however, this claim could not be corroborated. The Christian community also claimed that there were no Christian churches in the country and that the Government would not grant approval for such a building.

No new buildings, including new 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.

While the formation of political parties was not allowed under the law, the draft constitution would permit the creation of political parties, with no membership restrictions based on religion.

While proselytism and conversion were not discussed in the constitution, such activities were deemed illegal by the Government due to the National Security Act, which prohibits "words either spoken or written, or by other means whatsoever, promotes or attempts 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 Act is punishable with up to three years' imprisonment although it is not clear that the Government has enforced this provision of the act.

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

There were no laws against publishing religious material.

Some NGOs reported increased intimidation by the Government of persons who do not look ethnically Ngalop, most of whom are Buddhists. Such actions reportedly included stopping persons at designated checkpoints and asking for their identity documents. The Government claimed the identity checks were part of an effort to control illegal residents and to ensure that the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) does not re-enter the country. In 2003, the Government ousted ULFA camps from southern areas of the country.

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.

Christians stated that in prior years the Government excluded them from census registration, making it difficult for them to qualify for higher education or government jobs. There were no reports of the Government excluding Christians from the May 2005 census.

One Christian group alleged in April 2005 that personal prejudices may have led selected government officials to deny promotions to some of the handful of Christians in government service.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Authorities discriminated against ethnic Nepalese residents and citizens in the late 1980s and early 1990s when many were forcibly expelled, or left voluntarily as a result of discrimination. Although the causes of this official discrimination and the expulsions were cultural, economic, and political, to the degree that their Hinduism identified them as members of the ethnic Nepalese minority, religion might have been a secondary factor. The Government contended that many of those expelled in the early 1990s were illegal immigrants with no right to citizenship or residency and that other ethnic Nepalese "voluntarily emigrated" at that time. Some of those expelled are petitioning for the right to return, although none have yet done so. More than 100 thousand ethnic Nepalese continued to live in refugee camps in eastern Nepal. (For a more detailed discussion, see the 2005 Country Report on Human Rights Practices.)

The Government resettled Bhutanese citizens from other parts of the country on land in the south vacated by the expelled ethnic Nepalese, a majority of whom were Hindu, in the early 1990s. Human rights groups maintained that this action prejudiced any possibility for 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 parts of the country.

In April 2004 a religious freedom website alleged that following Easter Sunday services, police raided three Protestant house churches in the Sarpang district. Police allegedly warned church members to stop meeting and told them that the Government viewed their meetings as "terrorist activities." The Government dismissed these reports as totally false.

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.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

NGOs and well-informed local sources stated that the Government in early 2005 began to issue national identity cards to ethnic Nepalese who have family members living in refugee camps in Nepal. In the past, the Government refused to renew identity cards for some ethnic Nepalese. This was a marked change in government policy and could point to a greater acceptance of these predominantly Hindu persons as bona fide citizens of the country.

In 2005, attempts were made to promote interfaith understanding. Monks from the country's two schools of Buddhism, Kagyupa and Nyingmapa, undertook regular exchanges. The king's participation in a Hindu festival also had a positive effect on citizens' attitudes.

In March 2005, the Government released a draft constitution stipulating freedom of religion as a fundamental right. It stated, "A Bhutanese Citizen shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion." The draft constitution also guarantees freedom of speech, opinion and expression to all religious communities in the country, including non-Buddhists. It also states "Buddhism is the spiritual heritage of the country, which promotes among others the principles and values of peace, non-violence, compassion and tolerance" and that "religion remains separate from politics."

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Governmental discrimination against ethnic Nepalese in the late 1980s and early 1990s arose in part from a desire to preserve the country's Buddhist culture against the influence of a growing population of ethnic Nepalese with different cultural and religious traditions. It also was a response to increased political assertiveness of the ethnic Nepalese community.

During the reporting period, the Government and many Buddhists remained preoccupied with fears of potential Nepalese domination. 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.

In 2005, some of the country's few Christians, who are mostly ethnic Nepalese living in the south, claimed that they were harassed and discriminated against by the Government, local authorities, and non-Christian citizens.

On January 7, 2006, authorities arrested two civil servants for proselytism in the village of Nago in Paro District. The Government stated the two were posing as if they were on official duty and instructed the residents of Nago village to assemble for official discussions on faith. The Government reported that during their discussion one of the civil servants made derogatory remarks against the Spiritual Head of Bhutan, and the villagers demanded they stop the session and reported the incident to the police. Two days later, the Government found the two guilty of falsely calling a village meeting on the pretext of holding an official meeting, proselytism, maligning the Spiritual Head of Bhutan, and posing as officials on official business and giving false information. The police also charged one of the accused, who was a nurse by profession, with breach of trust and criminal misappropriation of government property for unauthorized distribution of medicines, claiming he did so in order to gain the confidence of the villagers. Christian groups claim they were arrested due to their religion since, according to these groups, the men were allegedly arrested while showing a Christian film in a Buddhist home. Reportedly, the men were given ten days to appeal to the courts for bail to avoid serving prison sentences of three to three and a half years and were tried without adequate legal representation.

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, governmental discrimination against the ethnic Nepalese minority was discussed.

In August 2005, U.S. embassy officers from New Delhi discussed religious freedom with the Government in the context of the refugee issue and the draft constitution in Thimphu. During the meeting, officials discussed the draft constitution, including the inclusion of guarantees of religious freedom and protection for minority populations. The officials also reiterated that the Government needs to find a lasting solution for the refugees in Nepal, who are mostly Hindu, in order to demonstrate its commitment to religious tolerance.

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

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