

BHUTAN 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution recognizes Buddhism as the state's "spiritual heritage," provides for freedom of religion, and bans discrimination based on religious belief. The constitution states religious institutions and personalities shall remain "above politics." The law restricts religious speech promoting enmity between religious groups and requires religious groups to obtain licenses to hold public religious gatherings. Nongovernmental organizations (NGO) continued to report that the lack of clarity in the law addressing "inducements to conversion" placed the activities of minority religious groups at risk of legal sanction by the government. According to the NGO Open Doors and a local pastor, churches that have applied for registration continued to await approval from the government's Commission for Religious Organizations (CRO). Because of these delays, there was only one registered non-Buddhist religious group in the country: the Hindu Dharma Samurai, an umbrella body representing the Hindu population of the country. NGOs reported unregistered religious groups continued to be able to worship in private. Christians said they continued to hold religious meetings discreetly in private facilities; Christians living near the border with India said they continued to travel to India to worship. One Christian leader said school administrators sometimes denied Christian children access to schools, particularly in rural areas.

According to NGOs, societal pressure on individuals to participate in Buddhist traditions and practices continued. An NGO reported continuing societal discrimination against Christians in their personal and professional lives.

The United States does not have a diplomatic presence in the country. Officers from the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi continued to visit periodically.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 758,000 (July 2017 estimate). According to a 2010 report by the Pew Research Center, approximately 75 percent of the population follows the Drukpa Kagyu or Nyingma schools of Buddhism. Hindus are approximately 22 percent of the total population and reside mostly in southern areas of the country.

According to the Pew Research Center and the Open Doors World Watch List, estimates of the size of the Christian community range from the low thousands to

20,000. Estimates by local and international Christian groups range from 3,000 to 15,000. Most Christians are concentrated in towns in the south of the country. Although traditional Bon practices are often combined with Buddhist practices, very few citizens adhere exclusively to this religious tradition, according to scholars. The Sharchop ethnic group, which forms the majority of the population in the east, practices elements of Tibetan Buddhism combined with elements of the Bon tradition and Hinduism, according to the advocacy group Alliance Defending Freedom.

In May Bhutan's Home Minister stated there were 53,042 foreign workers in the country, most of whom are likely Hindu or Muslim, based on previous government information.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution recognizes Buddhism as the state's "spiritual heritage" and stipulates it is "the responsibility of all religious institutions and personalities to promote the spiritual heritage of the country." The constitution states every citizen has "the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion" and bans discrimination based on faith. The constitution says the king must be Buddhist and requires the king to be the "protector of all religions."

The constitution states, "No person shall be compelled to belong to another faith by means of coercion or inducement." The penal code criminalizes coercion or inducement to convert as a misdemeanor, punishable by up to three years' imprisonment.

The law prohibits oral or written communication "promoting enmity between religious groups" and provides for sentences of up to three years' imprisonment for violations. There were no reports of prosecutions.

The penal code states individuals found guilty of promoting civil unrest by advocating "religious abhorrence," disturbing public tranquility, or committing an act "prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony" between religious groups shall be subject to punishment of five to nine years' imprisonment. There were no reports of prosecutions during the year.

The law requires religious groups to register with the CRO. To register, a religious group must submit an application demonstrating its leaders are citizens and disclose their educational background and financial assets. The law also specifies the organizational structure, bylaws, and procedural rules registered religious organizations must follow. The law prohibits religious organizations from “violating the spiritual heritage” of the country and requires them to protect and promote it. The law also states no religious organization shall do anything to impair the sovereignty, security, unity, or territorial integrity of the country. The law mandates the CRO certify that religious groups applying for registration meet the requirements specified in the law.

Registered religious groups may raise funds for religious activities; they are exempt from taxes. Registered groups require permission from local government authorities to hold public meetings outside of their registered facilities and must seek permission from the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs to invite foreign speakers or receive foreign funds.

Unregistered religious groups may not organize publicly, own property, raise funds, conduct outreach activities, or import literature. According to the law, these activities are subject to penalties ranging from fines to prison terms, depending on the offense. Unregistered religious groups may hold private worship services in homes. The law states it is an offense for a religious group to provide false or misleading information in its religious teachings, to misuse investments, or to raise funds illegally. The CRO has authority to determine whether the content of a group’s religious teachings is false or misleading and whether it has raised funds illegally. Sanctions include fines and potential revocation of registration.

The law states the CRO shall consist of an eight-member board responsible for overseeing the structure of religious institutions, enforcing the constitutional separation between the government and religious organizations, and monitoring religious fundraising activities. The chairperson of the board is a cabinet minister appointed by the prime minister. A senior official from the Ministry of Finance and one of the king’s appointees to the National Council also sit on the board. The director of culture in the Ministry of Home Affairs serves as an ex-officio secretary. Heads of Buddhist religious bodies and the Hindu Dharma Samurai occupy the remaining seats. The law requires the CRO “ensure that religious institutions and personalities promote the spiritual heritage of the country” by developing a society “rooted in Buddhist ethos.”

The constitution states the king shall appoint the chief abbot of the central monastic body on the advice of the five masters of the monastic body. Those individuals and a civil servant administrative secretary make up the Commission for Monastic Affairs, which manages issues related to Buddhist doctrine. The constitution says the state will provide funds and “facilities” to the central monastic body.

The law permits the government to “avoid breaches of the peace” by requiring licenses for public assembly, prohibiting assembly in designated areas, and imposing curfews. The government may apply these measures to groups and organizations of all kinds, including religious groups.

Government approval is required to construct religious buildings. By law, all buildings, including religious structures must adhere to traditional Bhutanese architectural standards. The CRO determines conformity with these standards.

The constitution states religious institutions have the responsibility to ensure religion remains separate from the state. It also says, “Religious institutions and personalities shall remain above politics.” The law prohibits religious organizations from involvement in political activity. Ordained members of the clergy of any religion may not engage in political activities, including running for office and voting.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

NGO representatives continued to express concern over the lack of a clear definition in the constitution and legal code for terms such as “inducement to religious conversion.” They stated this lack of clarity continued to put the religious activities of minority religious groups at risk, citing religious teaching, charitable services, and public education as examples of activities the government could penalize. Civil society representatives continued to say the potential existed for arbitrary government action, however, there were no reports during the year that the government used the law to penalize any one and surreptitious religious conversions from Buddhism to other religions continued.

According to Open Doors and a local pastor, churches that previously applied for registration continued to await a response from the CRO. Hindu Dharma Samurai

was the only registered non-Buddhist religious group, out of 96 registered groups. As in previous years, the CRO reported no Christian groups had applied for registration. Members of Christian associations reported that Christian groups attempting to register on multiple occasions in the past also received no official response. Christian groups said the lack of registration meant they continued not to be able to raise funds. They added that villagers disrupted their gatherings and local authorities questioned their legal status. Christian groups and media sources reported the government continued to provide preferential treatment for Buddhist groups for registration and financial support.

NGOs reported unregistered religious groups continued to be able to worship in private but remained unable to exercise certain rights such as property ownership. Members of the Christian community continued to report holding religious meetings discreetly in private facilities. They also continued to report that some Christians living close to the country's border traveled to India for worship. An NGO reported one house church closed and those in another district ceased meetings after receiving threats and warnings from the government.

An NGO reported that Christians said they often faced difficulty or fail to obtain a "non-objection certificate" from local authorities, required for loan and employment applications, property registration, , and the renewal of identification cards.

The government continued its financial assistance for the construction of Buddhist temples and shrines, as well as funding for Buddhist monks and monasteries. Government construction, which began in 2012 and scheduled for completion in 2018, continued on a large Hindu temple in Thimphu.

Local NGOs reported compulsory Buddhist daily prayer sessions in schools continued. Some Christian leaders said children of Christian families faced discrimination from teachers and sometimes were denied access to schools. The government reportedly continued to provide scholarships for Hindus to study Sanskrit in India.

Courts and some other government institutions remained housed within Buddhist monasteries. Some religious groups stated government ceremonies continued to involve mandatory Buddhist prayer rituals. An NGO reported government pressure on non-Buddhists in civil service positions to participate in Buddhist rites and contribute to festivals. According to the NGO, government employees who refused to comply were pressured to resign.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

NGOs reported continuing societal pressure on individuals to participate in Buddhist traditions and practices. The NGO Open Doors reported Christians faced discrimination in their personal and professional lives and rated persecution of Christians as “very high.” According to Open Doors, Christians experienced tremendous pressure to conform and were persecuted accordingly, since Buddhism and traditional religions were considered part of the country’s heritage. For Christian converts, surveillance by local religious leaders, families, and entire communities prevented the free expression and practice of the Christian faith.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The United States does not have a diplomatic presence in the country and does not maintain formal diplomatic relations with the government. The U.S. Embassy in New Delhi continued to conduct informal discussions during periodic visits.