

BHUTAN

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom, but in practice, the government limited this freedom when it deemed that religious activity interfered with the country's identity and stability. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in the respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom. The government allegedly put pressure on non-Buddhists to uphold the country's "Buddhist spiritual heritage." However, during the year, the government made statements promoting religious tolerance, especially of Christians, and considered giving Christians legal status, although the decision remained pending at year's end.

There were some unconfirmed reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, including in rural areas and in schools. There was societal pressure on non-Buddhists to uphold the "Buddhist spiritual heritage" of the country, including participating in Buddhist prayers and rituals.

There are no formal diplomatic relations between the United States and the government. Since the country became a democracy in 2008, the U.S. government has encouraged the government to uphold human rights and religious freedom as part of its democratization process. U.S. officials raised issues of religious freedom with government officials.

Section I. Religious Demography

A majority of the population practices Drukpa Kagyu or Nyingmapa Buddhism, both of which are disciplines of Mahayana Buddhism. The Nepali-speaking minority population practices Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism. Hindu temples exist in southern areas, and in October, the government approved the construction of a Hindu temple in the capital, Thimphu. Christianity is said to be concentrated in towns and in the south.

According to unconfirmed estimates, there are between 6,000 and 21,000 Christians in the country. There are also reports of a few Muslims in the country. Although priests of the Bon tradition (animism) often officiate and include Bon rituals in Buddhist festivals, very few citizens adhere exclusively to this religious group. Some citizens from the eastern part of the country, known as Sharchops,

reportedly practice Buddhism combined with elements of the Bon tradition and Hinduism.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom (Heading 1)

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

The constitution stipulates, “A Bhutanese citizen shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. No person shall be compelled to belong to another faith by means of coercion or inducement.” It also states, “No one shall be discriminated against on the grounds of race, sex, language, religion, politics, or other status.”

The constitution states that Buddhism is the state’s “spiritual heritage.” The country is a democratic constitutional monarchy. The constitution mandates that the king be the “protector of all religions” in the country. Government approval is required to build religious buildings and, according to the law, they should adhere to the traditions and cultural norms of the country.

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. There were no reports of cases prosecuted under the act at the end of the year.

The Penal Code states that a defendant shall be guilty of promoting civil unrest by committing an act that is “prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony between different nationalities, racial groups, castes, and religious groups and that disturbs the public tranquility.” The punishment is a prison sentence of five to nine years. There were no reports of cases prosecuted under this law at the end of the year.

With a mandate to protect and preserve the spiritual heritage of the country and register all religious organizations, the Chhoedey Lhentshog, a religious regulatory authority, was established in 2009. In addition to registering and regulating religious groups, the eight-member board of the Chhoedey Lhentshog defines roles

in religious institutions, precludes religious figures from running in secular elections, and helps ensure that fundraising activities are lawful and non-predatory.

There is one registered non-Buddhist organization, the Hindu Dharma Samudaya, for the Hindu population. In December the Chhoedey Lhentshog considered giving legal status to one Christian organization that would provide opportunities for Christians to openly practice their religion and build places of worship. Although the decision is still pending, the government called for religious tolerance towards Christians.

There are no laws against publishing religious materials.

The government subsidizes Buddhist monasteries and shrines and provides aid to most of the country's monks and nuns. The government does not provide aid to religious leaders of other religions.

The government contends that there is no religious curriculum in educational institutions in the country. Although Buddhist teaching is permitted in monastic schools, religious teaching is forbidden in other schools. Local nongovernmental organizations state that students take part in a compulsory Buddhist prayer session each morning.

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

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. The government limited religious freedom in practice when it deemed that religious activity interfered with the country's identity or stability. Subtle pressure by the government on non-Buddhists to observe the traditional Drukpa values existed, including asking non-Buddhist students to participate in Buddhist prayer sessions and Buddhist rituals in schools. The government took steps to improve respect for religious freedom by calling for religious tolerance, including of Christians.

The government expelled or persuaded to leave approximately 90,000 Nepali-speaking residents, a majority of them Hindus, in the early 1990s. The government claimed that these individuals were illegal immigrants, a claim denied by the many of those expelled. The expelled population went to refugee camps in Nepal.

Following the failure of negotiations between Nepal and the government on the repatriation of the Bhutanese refugees, the U.S. and six other countries proposed a third-country resettlement program, which started in 2008 and continued at year's end.

Followers of religions other than Buddhism and Hinduism generally were free to worship in private, but the government did not grant them permission to build religious buildings or practice their religions in public. Conversions to Christianity took place, but some Christian groups claimed that religious meetings had to be held discreetly. Some Christian congregations had 400-500 members and were allowed to meet in non-religiously labeled private buildings.

Although there are no laws that prohibit distribution or possession of religious materials, there were conflicting reports that the publication of Bibles and the building of Christian schools were prohibited in practice.

New buildings, including places of worship, may be constructed only with a government license. Unconfirmed reports suggested this process favored Buddhist over Hindu temples, although the government approved the construction of a Hindu temple in Thimphu. One Buddhist association claimed that the government restricted the construction of a Buddhist monastery belonging to the Nyingmapa sect, as the Drukpa Kagyu sect enjoys state and royal patronage. The government provided financial assistance for the construction of Buddhist temples and shrines and funding for monks and monasteries. The government stated that the demand for Buddhist temples exceeded that for Hindu temples, that it supported Hindu temples in the south where most Hindus reside, and that it provided scholarships for Hindus to study Sanskrit in India.

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.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were unconfirmed reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, including teasing of and sometimes denial of admission to non-Buddhist children in schools and verbal abuse against non-Buddhists in rural areas. There were societal pressures on non-Buddhists to uphold the "Buddhist spiritual heritage" of the country, including participating in Buddhist prayers and rituals.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

There are no formal diplomatic relations between the United States and the government. The U.S. government worked to promote human rights, religious freedom, and other democratic values by sponsoring travel of citizens to the United States under the International Visitors, Humphrey, and Fulbright programs, and by raising issues of religious freedom with government officials.