

BHUTAN 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution recognizes Buddhism as the state's "spiritual heritage." It provides for the 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. Representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGO) continued to report the activities of minority religious groups were placed at risk of legal sanction by what they said was the lack of clarity in the portion of the law addressing "inducements to conversion." During the year, a group of Christian churches applied for registration, but reported they still awaited a response from the Commission for Religious Organizations (CRO), leaving one Hindu umbrella organization as the only registered non-Buddhist religious group. 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; those Christians living near the border said they continued to travel to India to worship. There were reports school administrators sometimes denied Christian children access to schools.

According to NGOs, there continued to be societal pressure on individuals to participate in Buddhist traditions and practices. 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. The U.S. Ambassador and officers from the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi continued to visit periodically, promoting equal treatment for religious minorities in meetings with government officials.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 750,000 (July 2016 estimate). According to the Pew Research Center, approximately 75 percent of the population follows the Drukpa Kagyu or Nyingma schools of Buddhism, while Hindus comprise approximately 22 percent of the total population and reside mostly in southern areas of the country.

Estimates of the size of the Christian community range from 2,000 (from the Pew Research Center) to 15,000 (from the Bertelsmann Foundation's Transformation Index 2016 country report). The estimates by local and international Christian groups range from 3,000 to 15,000. Most Christians are reportedly 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.

According to a December estimate by the Ministry of Labor and Human Resources there are 54,000 Indian laborers in the country, most of whom are Hindu or Muslim.

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 religion. The constitution states 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.

The law requires religious groups to register with the CRO. In order to register, a religious group must submit an application demonstrating its leaders are citizens and disclosing 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 religious groups applying for registration meet the requirements specified in the law.

Registered religious groups may raise funds for religious activities and 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 to address them or to 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 upon 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, as well as 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. The remaining seats are occupied by the heads of Buddhist religious bodies and a Hindu body. The law requires the CRO to “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. All religious buildings are legally required to 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 are prohibited from engaging in political activities, including running for office or 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 the 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 that could be penalized. Civil society representatives continued to say there was the potential for misuse and arbitrary action by the government, but they confirmed religious conversions nonetheless continued to take place. They stated the government had not used the law to penalize anyone as of the end of the year.

At least one group of Christian churches reportedly applied for registration, but did not receive a response from the CRO as of year's end. As it had in previous years, the CRO reported no Christian groups had applied for registration. Members of Christian associations reported Christian groups had similarly attempted to register on multiple occasions in the past, but had also received no official response. Christian groups said the lack of registration meant they continued not to be able to raise funds.

Christian groups and media sources reported the government continued to provide preferential treatment for Buddhist groups in terms of registration and financial support. Of a total of 96 registered groups, the Hindu Dharma Samudaya, an umbrella body representing the Hindu population, remained the only registered non-Buddhist organization.

NGO representatives 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 some Christians living close to the country's border traveled to India for worship.

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

Local NGOs reported there continued to be compulsory Buddhist prayer sessions in schools every morning. There were reports children of Christian families faced discrimination from teachers and were sometimes denied access to schools. The government reportedly continued to provide scholarships for Hindus to study Sanskrit in India.

Some government institutions, such as courts, remained housed within Buddhist monasteries. Some religious groups stated government ceremonies continued to involve mandatory Buddhist prayer rituals. Although there were reports of Christians employed in government contracting positions, NGO representatives continued to report government pressure on non-Buddhists to observe "traditional Drukpa values" and participate in Buddhist prayer rituals. According to NGOs, some non-Buddhist government employees continued to say their participation in these ceremonies was a requirement for career advancement.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to NGOs, there continued to be societal pressure on individuals to participate in Buddhist traditions and practices.

The NGO Open Doors reported Christians continued to face discrimination in their personal and professional lives.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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 relations through periodic visits, including by the Ambassador. Embassy officers promoted tolerance of religious minorities in meetings with government officials and discussed issues affecting religious minorities in meetings with NGOs and members of various religious communities.