

BHUTAN 2019 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 among religious groups and requires religious groups to obtain licenses to hold public religious gatherings. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) 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. Churches that applied for registration continued to await approval from the government’s Commission for Religious Organizations (CRO). As a result, there were only two registered non-Buddhist religious groups in the country, while registered Buddhist groups increased from 110 to 125. Hindu leaders cited continued support for the construction of Hindu temples, including a major project in the capital. NGOs reported that unregistered religious groups continued to be able to worship in private, but were unable to organize publicly, own property, raise funds, conduct outreach activities, or import literature. A representative of the NGO Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) said the legal framework providing government patronage and protection of Buddhism worked against other faiths, including Christianity and Hinduism. International Christian NGO Open Doors continued to list the country on its World Watch List, stating the government was intent on maintaining a strong national identity and unity by suppressing outside influences, including Christianity. Pastors cited their most significant challenge to be acquiring permanent Christian burial plots. According to Open Doors, the government has not officially recognized any churches, which led the organization to conclude that Christians in the country “are technically worshipping illegally.” Open Doors in its 2020 World Watch List reported, “No Christian congregation has ever been allowed to build a church structure,” and, “All Christian fellowship remains underground.” The India-based Hindu religious organization Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), an affiliate of the Hindu advocacy group Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), said that the minority Hindu community faced discrimination. The RSS itself said that it was not aware of any problems facing Hindus in the country, and commented that relations between Hindus and Buddhists were good. Leaders from the Hindu Dharmic Samudai, one of eight religious organizations on the board of the Commission for Religious Organizations, said Hindus and Buddhists enjoyed close ties. The organization cited strong official support for Hindu religious practice, including royal support

for the construction of Hindu temples and participation in Hindu religious ceremonies and festivals.

NGOs reported continuing societal pressure on individuals to participate in Buddhist traditions and practices. Open Doors said Christians faced discrimination in their personal and professional lives and rated persecution of Christians to be “very high.” Open Doors also reported in its World Watch List 2020 report, “For [Christian] converts, family members are by far the strongest sources of persecution.” According to Open Doors, Christian students were forced to participate in Buddhist rituals and Christian farmers were excluded from communal planting and harvesting.

The United States does not have formal diplomatic relations with the country or a diplomatic presence there. During periodic visits, officers from the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi engaged with a wide range of both government and nongovernment figures on issues relating to freedom of religious practice and the treatment of religious minorities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 774,000 (midyear 2019 estimate). According to a 2010 report by the Pew Research Center, approximately 75 percent of the population follows either the Drukpa Kagyu or the Nyingma school of Buddhism. Hindus make up approximately 22 percent of the total population and reside mostly in southern areas.

According to the Pew Research Center and the Open Doors World Watch List, estimates of the size of the Christian community range from 8,000 to 30,000. Most Christians are concentrated in towns in the south. 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 makes up the majority of the population in the east, practices elements of Tibetan Buddhism combined with elements of the Bon tradition and Hinduism, according to scholars.

India’s Ministry of External Affairs said that as of October, there were approximately 60,000 Indian nationals living in the country, who work in the construction sector, as well as between 8,000 and 10,000 temporary workers in the country on a daily basis. While there is no data on their religious affiliation, most are likely Hindu and, in fewer numbers, 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 provides for 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. Neither "coercion" nor "inducement to convert" are defined in law or regulation.

The law prohibits oral or written communication "promoting enmity among religious groups" and provides for sentences of up to three years' imprisonment.

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" among religious groups shall be subject to punishment of five to nine years' imprisonment.

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 disclosing their educational background and financial assets. The law also specifies the organizational structure, bylaws, and procedural rules registered religious organizations must follow. It 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. It mandates that the CRO certify that religious groups applying for registration meet the specified requirements.

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 or receive foreign funds.

Unregistered religious groups may not organize publicly, own property, raise funds, conduct outreach activities, or import literature. Penalties for unregistered organizations performing these activities range 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 the 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, currently the Minister of Home and Cultural Affairs. 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 Samudaya occupy the remaining seats. 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. By law, all buildings, including religious structures, must adhere to traditional 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 states, “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

An ADF representative said the legal framework providing government patronage and protection to Buddhism worked against other faiths, including Christianity and Hinduism. Open Doors continued to list the country on its World Watch List, stating the government was intent on maintaining a strong national identity and unity by suppressing outside influences, including Christianity.

According to Open Doors, the government has not officially recognized any churches, which, according to the NGO, means that Christians “are technically worshipping illegally.” Open Doors in its 2020 World Watch List reported, “No Christian congregation has ever been allowed to build a church structure . . . All Christian fellowship remains underground.” The government has not offered any explanation, public or private, to these groups for its refusal to register them.

There are two Hindu groups among 125 registered religious organizations.

According to Open Doors, one house church was forced to close and cease meetings after receiving warnings and threats from authorities. Authorities held two pastors for questioning.

Open Doors cited reports by Bhutanese Christians that they often faced difficulties in obtaining “non-objection certificates” from local authorities that were required for loan and employment applications, property registration, and the renewal of identification cards.

The India-based Hindu organization VHP, an affiliate of the RSS, said that thousands of Hindu women who had immigrated to the country after marriage to residents were not granted citizenship, and that Hindu citizens are denied job opportunities in the civil services. VHP said that the government prohibited the publication of Hindu religious calendars and establishment of religious congregations. A spokesman for the RSS said that the organization was not aware of any problems facing Hindus, and that relations between Hindus and Buddhists were good. Leaders from the Bhutan-based Hindu Dharmic Samudai said Hindus and Buddhists enjoyed close ties, and they cited the king's personal support for the construction of Hindu temples and his participation in Hindu religious ceremonies and festivals. Hindu leaders said Hinduism enjoyed strong official support in the country, where Hindus and Buddhists were viewed "like two branches of one tree." Christian pastors cited their most significant challenge as acquiring permanent Christian burial plots. Pastors noted that Christians had less access to radio and television broadcasts and fewer officially endorsed public celebrations than the Hindu community. They also said the Christian community believed that ambiguities in religious affairs laws could be used to penalize the celebration of Christian religious services.

The government continued its financial assistance for the construction of Buddhist temples and shrines, as well as funding for Buddhist monks and monasteries.

NGOs reported that compulsory Buddhist daily prayer sessions in schools continued, and that children of Christian families faced discrimination from teachers and sometimes were denied access to schools.

Courts and some other government institutions remained housed within or adjacent to Buddhist monasteries. Some religious groups stated government ceremonies continued to involve mandatory Buddhist prayer rituals. According to an NGO, there was continued pressure on non-Buddhists in civil service positions to participate in Buddhist rites and contribute to festivals.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

NGOs reported continuing societal pressure on individuals to participate in Buddhist traditions and practices. Open Doors said Christians faced discrimination in their personal and professional lives and described persecution of Christians as "very high." According to the Open Doors World Watch List 2020, "For [Christian] converts, family members are by far the strongest sources of persecution." According to Open Doors, Christian students were forced to

participate in morning and evening Buddhist rituals and in one instance, cleaning Buddhist shrines. The NGO also reported that Christian farmers were usually excluded from communal planting and harvesting, a rural tradition by which several farmers share the workload and offer mutual assistance.

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. During periodic visits, officers from the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi engaged with a wide range of government and nongovernment figures on issues relating to freedom of religious practice and the treatment of religious minorities.