

NEPAL 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes the country as a “secular state” but defines secularism as “protection of the age-old religion and culture and religious and cultural freedom.” It provides for the right to profess and practice one’s own religion. The constitution prohibits converting persons from one religion to another and bans religious behavior disturbing public order or contrary to public health, decency, and morality. A new criminal code, which became effective in August, reduces the punishments for “convert[ing]... the religion of another person” or for engaging in any act that undermines the religion, faith, or belief of others from six to five years’ imprisonment. It also criminalizes “harming the religious sentiment” of any caste, ethnic community, or class, either in speech or in writing. The law does not provide for registration or official recognition of religious organizations as religious institutions, except for Buddhist monasteries. All other religious groups must register as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or nonprofit organizations to own property or operate legally. In several locations, police arrested individuals accused of slaughtering cows or oxen. Christian groups continued to report difficulties registering or operating as NGOs. Christian and Muslim groups continued to face difficulties in buying or using land for burials. Tibetan community leaders said government authorities generally permitted them to celebrate Buddhist holidays in private ceremonies but drastically curtailed their ability to hold public celebrations since 2016, a break from historical practice. The government once again rescinded its recognition of Christmas as a public holiday, a decision Christian groups said was a reflection of anti-Christian sentiment. For the first time under the constitution that went into effect in 2015, officials deported numerous foreigners for seeking to convert Hindus to Christianity. In July authorities fined a Filipino and Indonesian couple and revoked their visas. Christian religious leaders expressed concern about the emphasis placed by some politicians on the re-establishment of the country as a Hindu state, which they said had a negative impact on the public perception of Christians. On July 2, police arrested four Christians in Taplejung District, accusing them of forcible conversion in a case involving the non-Christian husband of a Christian woman who had asked for help with her husband’s alcoholism. Authorities arrested two Christians on April 30 in Chitwan District on charges of forceful conversion and hurting religious sentiment, releasing the men a few days later. According to an online Christian media outlet, on May 9, police in Kathmandu arrested three women at a church on charges of attempting to convert through inducement. Authorities arrested six Christians in Terhathum District on charges of proselytizing in early

May. On July 9, a court acquitted them of distributing literature. Police arrested nine Jehovah's Witnesses in November for proselytizing. Police deported three to their countries of origin, released three on bail and three remained in prison. Police arrested nine Jehovah's Witnesses in November in Bardiya and Rupandehi Districts on charges of proselytizing. Among these, authorities detained and deported three foreigners, two Japanese and one Australian. The district courts released three of the Nepali citizens on bail in December, while three remained incarcerated without access to religious material since their arrests in November.

In May assailants bombed the Mahima Church in Kailali District and arsonists targeted three churches in other districts. On April 28, arsonists attacked a Catholic church building in the Banke District, and members of Hindu Jagaran Nepal, which local experts described as a small pro-Hindu group with little influence, on April 30 threatened to destroy it. Eight to 10 unidentified men broke into St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Banke District and set it on fire on May 5. The fire caused minor damage; there were no injuries reported. Christian leaders stated their belief the attacks during the year on churches, as well as the 2017 arson attack on the Assumption Roman Catholic Cathedral in Lalitpur and 2017 shooting of a Federation of National Christians Nepal (FNCN) employee, represented an effort to foment panic among the Christian community. They also expressed concern about lack of police willingness to investigate the cases thoroughly. Police filed charges against 28 individuals accused of participating in Hindu-Muslim interreligious clashes in 2016 during which two persons in the Banke District were killed; as of year's end, the case remained pending. Muslim leaders expressed disappointment at the district court's decision to set the arrested individuals' bail at a low amount. According to NGOs, Hindu priests and other high-caste individuals continued to prevent persons of lower castes, particularly Dalits, from accessing Hindu temples and performing religious rites.

Throughout the year, the U.S. Ambassador, embassy officers, and other U.S. government representatives met with government officials to express concern over restrictions on freedom of religion posed by provisions in the constitution and the new criminal code, including the continued criminalization of conversion and new measures to criminalize proselytization. They also met with representatives of civil society groups and religious groups to discuss concerns about access to burial grounds, public celebrations of religious holidays, the prohibition against conversion, and verbal attacks on Christian communities by Hindu politicians. Following May's multiple arson attacks, U.S. embassy officers met with victims and police, and urged the latter to investigate the cases thoroughly. Embassy

outreach and assistance programs continued to promote religious diversity and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 29.7 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2011 census, the most recent, Hindus constitute 81.3 percent of the population, Buddhists 9 percent, Muslims (the vast majority of whom are Sunni) 4.4 percent, and Christians (a large majority of whom are Protestant) 1.4 percent. Other groups, which together constitute less than 5 percent of the population, include Kirats (an indigenous religion with Hindu influence), animists, adherents of Bon (a Tibetan religious tradition), Jains, Baha'is, and Sikhs. According to some Muslim leaders, Muslims constitute at least 5.5 percent of the population, mostly concentrated in the south. According to some Christian groups, Christians constitute anywhere from 3 to 10 percent of the population. Many individuals adhere to a syncretic faith encompassing elements of Hinduism, Buddhism, and traditional folk practices, according to scholars.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares the country to be a secular state but defines secularism as “protection of the age-old religion and culture and religious and cultural freedom.” The constitution stipulates every person has the right to profess, practice, and protect his or her religion. While exercising this right, the constitution bans individuals from engaging in any acts “contrary to public health, decency, and morality” or that “disturb the public law and order situation.” It also prohibits persons from converting other persons from one religion to another or disturbing the religion of others and states violations are punishable by law.

The new criminal code, effective in August, reduces the punishment for converting – or encouraging the conversion of – another person or for engaging in any act, including the propagating of religion, that undermines the religion, faith, or belief of any caste, ethnic group, or community, from six to five years’ imprisonment. It also stipulates a fine of up to 50,000 Nepali rupees (\$450) and subjects foreign nationals convicted of these crimes to deportation. The new criminal code also imposes punishments of up to two years’ imprisonment and a fine of up to 20,000 rupees (\$180) for “harming the religious sentiment” of any caste, ethnic community, or class, either in speech or in writing.

The law does not provide for registration or official recognition of religious organizations as religious institutions, except for Buddhist monasteries. It is not mandatory for Buddhist monasteries to register with the government, but doing so is a prerequisite for receiving government funding for maintenance of facilities, skills training for monks, and study tours. A monastery development committee under the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration oversees the registration process. Requirements for registration include furnishing a recommendation from a local government body, information about the members of the monastery's management committee, a land ownership certificate, and photographs of the premises.

Except for Buddhist monasteries, all religious groups must register as NGOs or nonprofit organizations to own land or other property, operate legally as institutions, or gain eligibility for public service-related government grants and partnerships. Religious organizations follow the same registration process as other NGOs and nonprofits, including preparing a constitution and furnishing information on the organization's objectives, as well as details on its executive committee members. To renew registration, which must be done annually, organizations must submit annual financial audit reports and activity progress reports.

The law prohibits the killing or harming of cattle. Violators are subject to a maximum sentence of three years in prison for killing cattle (reduced from 12 years in the previous criminal code) and six months' imprisonment and a fine of up to 50,000 rupees (\$450) for harming cattle (previously a six-year maximum for attempted killing).

A 2011 Supreme Court ruling requires the government to provide protection for religious groups carrying out funeral rites in the exercise of their constitutional right to practice their religion, but it also states the government is not obligated to provide land grants for this purpose. There is no law specifically addressing the funeral practices of religious groups.

The constitution establishes the government's authority to "make laws to operate and protect a religious place or religious trust and to manage trust property and regulate land management."

The law does not require religiously affiliated schools to register, but Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim religious schools must register as religious educational

institutions with local district education offices (under the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology) and supply information about their funding sources to receive funding at the same levels as nonreligious public/community schools. Religious public/community schools follow the same registration procedure as nonreligious public/community schools. Catholic and Protestant groups must register as NGOs to operate private schools. Christian schools are not legally able to register as public/community schools and are not eligible for government funding. Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim groups may also register as NGOs to operate private schools, but they are not eligible for funding in that case.

The law criminalizes acts of caste-based discrimination in places of worship. Penalties for violations are three months to three years imprisonment, a fine of 50,000 to 200,000 rupees (\$450 to \$1,800), or both. This represents an increase from the previous 1,000 to 25,000 rupee (\$9 to \$220) punishment.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

According to members of civil society groups, police arrested at least 26 individuals for alleged cow slaughter during the year, and civil society sources reported that many more remained incarcerated for previous convictions of cow slaughter. According to press reports, in March authorities dismissed the case against four persons whom the District Police Office in Gorkha had arrested in August 2017 for slaughtering a cow. The press reported police arrested four persons, Hum Bahadur Rana, Kumari Gharti, Ram Kumari Gharti, and Kunti Thapa, in Kapilvastu District on March 24 for cow slaughter.

On February 23, Parbat District Court sentenced four individuals – all of whom were Dalit – accused of slaughtering oxen in 2017 in Parbat to eight years imprisonment. One suspect remained at large. The accused said they did not kill the ox and that the animal was dead when they found it. In mid-August when the government enacted the new criminal code, the sentences were reduced to three years. Dalit rights activists said they believed the accused were targeted because of their social status as Dalits.

According to Christian groups and legal experts, police arrested and deported several persons for proselytizing. In June authorities deported a Filipino and an Indonesian couple to their respective countries on charges of “forceful religious conversion.” They had been operating a restaurant under a one-year business visa

while also serving as pastors in a local Christian church. Authorities did not imprison the pair, but fined them 50,000 rupees (\$450) and deported them after a complaint was lodged with the Ministry of Home Affairs for the alleged conversion of Hindus to Christianity. This was the first reported incident of deportation on religious grounds since the adoption of the new constitution in 2015, but Christian advocates stated they were concerned about what they characterized as increasing restrictions on religious freedom and hostility toward their faith community.

On July 2, in Taplejung District, police arrested Isak Tamang of the Shreejanga Free Church, Pastor Dip Rai of the Chengbung Free Church, as well as David Limbu and Shristi Limbu, accusing them of forcible conversion in a case involving the non-Christian husband of a Christian woman who had asked for help with her husband's alcoholism. The husband filed charges, asking for 500,000 rupees (\$4,500) to settle the case out of court.

According to local advocates, on April 30, authorities arrested two Christians in Chitwan District on charges of forceful conversion and hurting religious sentiment, releasing the men a few days later.

On May 9, police in Kathmandu arrested three women, Sumitra Gauli, Radhika Maharjan, and Phuldevi Bhattarai, in a church and charged them with attempting to convert "through inducement."

In March police arrested a woman along with her six-month-old baby on charges of attempting religious conversion and destroying Hindu idols. Officials subsequently released the mother and child, and as of September, the case remained ongoing. Several other arrests in April and May involved accusations of speaking against Hindu gods, encouraging the destruction of Hindu idols, and attempted conversion.

According to the online Christian media outlet *Morning Star News*, authorities arrested six Christians in Terhathum District on charges of proselytizing in early May. Four of the six, Dinesh Subba, Ashish Subba, Dipak Subba, and Manatula Dhital, were from Jhapa; two others, Barshiya Dhital and Pawan Rai, were visiting from India. Following a May 17 court appearance, authorities released them on bail after 15 days. On July 9, a court acquitted them of distributing literature, freeing them and releasing their car, which had been impounded.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses and local civil society members, police arrested nine Jehovah's Witnesses – three of whom were foreigners – in November in Bardiya and Rupandehi Districts on charges of proselytizing. Authorities detained the three foreigners, two Japanese and one Australian, for two weeks, fined each approximately \$500, and deported them. Rupandehi District Court released two of the Nepali citizens on approximately \$1,000 bond on December 10, and Bardiya District Court released another Nepali citizen on approximately \$3,000 bail on December 11. The other three Nepali citizens remained incarcerated without access to religious material.

Human rights lawyers and leaders of religious minorities expressed concern the constitution's and new criminal code's continuation of the ban on conversion could make religious minorities subject to legal prosecution for actions carried out in the normal course of their religious practices, and also vulnerable to prosecution for preaching, public displays of faith, and distribution of religious materials in contravention of constitutional assurances of freedom of speech and expression. Human rights experts also expressed concern that a provision in the criminal code banning speech or writing harmful to others' religious sentiments could be misused to settle personal scores or target religious minorities arbitrarily. According to numerous civil society and international community legal experts, some provisions in the law that restrict religious conversion could be invoked against a wide range of expressions of religion or belief, including the charitable activities of religious groups or merely speaking about one's faith.

According to the Jhapa district attorney's office, the criminal case against four suspects accused of detonating small homemade explosive devices at three churches in Jhapa District in 2015 continued. All four suspects remained free on bail while the criminal case was pending. Police continued to search for three additional suspects; there were no additional developments or arrests as of year's end.

Civil society members reported that in October authorities reprimanded and punished a constable with the Nepal Armed Police Force after he spoke openly about his Christian faith while off-duty at a multifaith religious gathering. A local reporter at the event reportedly published an article critical of his speech and informed his superiors, which led to his arrest and forced return to his home department. His superiors allegedly postponed his departmental promotion for five years as punishment.

According to legal experts and leaders of religious minority groups, the constitutional language about protecting the “age-old religion” and the prohibition on conversion were intended by the drafters to mandate the protection of Hinduism. Minority religious leaders said some politicians’ emphasis on re-establishing the country as a Hindu state continued to negatively affect public perception of Christians and Christianity. (The country was a Hindu monarchy until 2007 when the interim constitution established a secular democracy.)

Some media and academic analysts stated that prohibiting conversion had slowly entered into religious spheres in the country and that actors seeking political advantage manipulated the issue. The main opposition party, the Hindu nationalist Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), criticized the government for formal participation in the December Universal Peace Federation’s Asia Pacific Summit in Kathmandu sponsored by the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church). The topic of reverting from the secular state to a Hindu nation also dominated the opposition Nepali Congress Party’s General Convention Representative meeting held in December, despite not being part of the convention’s official agenda. Civil society leaders argued pressure from India’s ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, and other Hindu groups in India had pushed politicians in the country to support reversion to a Hindu state.

Civil society leaders alleged right-wing religious groups associated with India’s ruling party provided money to influential politicians of all parties, in an effort to push the country to again become a Hindu state. At the same time, Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) supporters concentrated their efforts on creating an unfriendly environment for Christians and encouraging “upper-caste” Hindus to enforce caste-based discrimination.

Leaders of the minority RPP continued their calls for the re-establishment of the country as a Hindu state and pushed for strong legal action against those accused of killing cows. The party leadership also stated its intention to ban forced, organized, and planned religious conversion achieved by financial rewards or false promises. Christian leaders continued to report support for a Hindu state was gaining momentum.

NGOs in various locations stated that municipalities and other local bodies began requiring significant tax payments despite their nonprofit status recognized at the central government level. NGOs are required to register with local government authorities annually, which religious leaders said placed their organizations at particular political risk. Christian leaders expressed fears the new obligations

could potentially limit the establishment of churches, which must be registered as NGOs. Some Christians interpreted the government efforts as an attempt to push Christian NGOs out of the country. Many Christian leaders said missionary hospitals, welfare organizations, and schools continued to operate without government interference, although others reported increased scrutiny when registering as NGOs. They said the government usually did not expel foreign workers for proselytizing (although there were exceptions), but missionaries reported they attempted to keep their activities discreet.

In April the government informally introduced a draft “National Integrity Policy,” which, if instituted, would ban international NGOs that tried to spread religion. Due to widespread backlash from civil society, media, the public, and in the government, the policy did not reach the level of political approval necessary to be finalized or presented to the cabinet.

Unlike in past years, the government chose not to provide a public holiday for Christmas. The Christian community criticized the government for bias and failure to respect minority religious practices because while the country is officially a secular state, Hindu and Buddhist holidays were routinely declared as public holidays. Christian community members said they interpreted the decision as a reflection of growing anti-Christian sentiment in the country.

The government continued restrictions instituted in 2016 on Tibetans’ ability to celebrate publicly the Dalai Lama’s birthday (July 6), stating the celebrations represented “anti-China” activities, but these restrictions were eased significantly, compared with previous years. Tibetan community leaders said government authorities generally permitted them to celebrate the Dalai Lama’s birthday only in private ceremonies and conduct other private ceremonies with cultural/religious significance, such as Losar, the Tibetan New Year, and World Peace Day (which commemorates the Dalai Lama receiving the Nobel Peace Prize). Tibetan leaders said they continued to mark certain anniversaries considered politically sensitive with small, quiet prayer ceremonies within Tibetan settlements, although during the year authorities allowed a large celebration of the Dalai Lama’s birthday. Abbots of Buddhist monasteries reported monasteries and their related social welfare projects generally continued to operate without government interference.

A Central Hajj Committee, made up of representatives of political parties, mosques, and civil society, under the authority of the Ministry of Home Affairs, continued to coordinate and facilitate logistics for the Hajj for all participating

Muslims. The government paid for 14 committee members, compared with 18 in 2017 and 10 in 2016, to travel to Saudi Arabia to carry out their work.

Christian leaders said the government-funded Pashupati Area Development Trust continued to prevent Christian burials in a common cemetery behind the Pashupati Hindu Temple in Kathmandu, while allowing burials of individuals from non-Hindu indigenous faiths. According to Christian leaders, the government continued its inconsistent enforcement of a court ruling requiring protection of congregations carrying out burials. Protestant churches continued to report difficulties gaining access to land they had bought several years prior for burials in the Kathmandu Valley in the names of individual church members. They stated local communities continued to oppose burial by groups perceived to be outsiders but were more open to burials conducted by Christian members of their own communities. As a result, they reported, some Protestants in the Kathmandu Valley continued to travel to the countryside to conduct burials in unpopulated areas.

Catholic leaders reported that despite their general preference for burials, almost all Catholic parishioners continued to choose cremation due to past difficulties with burials. Many Christian communities outside the Kathmandu Valley said they continued to be able to buy land for cemeteries, conduct burials in public forests, or use land belonging to indigenous communities for burials. They also said they continued to be able to use public land for this purpose.

Muslim groups stated individuals in the Kathmandu Valley continued to be able to buy land for cemeteries, but local Hindus sometimes refused to sell them land. In the southern Terai region, which is home to many Muslim-majority communities, Muslim groups said they had not encountered such problems.

According to Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim groups, the government continued to permit them to establish and operate their own community schools. The government provided the same level of funding for both registered religious schools and public schools, but private Christian schools (not legally able to register as community schools) continued not to receive government funding. Although religious education is not part of the curriculum in public schools, some public schools displayed a statue of Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of learning, on their grounds.

According to the Center for Education and Human Resource Development, which is under the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, 907 madrassahs were

registered with district education offices, an increase from 879 the previous year and 765 in 2016. The number of *gumbas* (Buddhist centers of learning) registered with the Department of Education rose from 82 in 2016 to 110 in 2017 and 114 in 2018. The Department had 100 *gurukhuls* (Hindu centers of learning) registered during the year, up from 83 in 2016 and 97 in 2017.

Some Muslim leaders stated as many as 2,500 to 3,000 madrassahs continued to be unregistered. They again expressed apprehension that some unregistered madrassahs were promoting the spread of less tolerant interpretations of Islam. According to religious leaders, a large number of madrassahs as well as Buddhist and Hindu schools continued to be unregistered because school operators hoped to avoid government auditing and the Department of Education's established curriculum. They said some school operators also wished to avoid the registration process, which they characterized as cumbersome.

Many foreign Christian organizations had direct ties to local churches and continued to sponsor clergy for religious training abroad.

On September 27, former Deputy Prime Minister and current chairman of the RPP Kamal Thapa posted a statement on Twitter claiming the spread of Christianity posed a serious threat to the country's cultural identity that could result in religious conflict. On December 31, Thapa posted a statement on Twitter warning proselytizing was spreading and posed a serious threat to national identity, stability, and social harmony.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were several reports of attacks on minority religious establishments. According to media and contacts in the Christian community, in May assailants vandalized four Christian churches during a two-week period. Mahima Church in Kailali District was reportedly bombed, damaging a window and some of the church's interior. Arsonists also targeted Emmanuel Church in Kanchanpur, Emmanuel Church Budor in Doti, and Hebron Church in Panchthar. There was no apparent structural damage or reports of injury, and as of October, police had not identified any suspects. Arsonists attacked a Catholic church building in Banke District on April 28, and members of Hindu Jagaran Nepal, which local experts describe as a small pro-Hindu group with little influence, threatened to destroy it in an April 30 post on social media. According to advocacy group Christian Solidarity Worldwide, on May 5, eight to 10 unidentified men broke into St.

Joseph's Catholic Church in Kohalpur, Banke District, and set it on fire. No one was injured, but the church's interior was destroyed.

Christian leaders stated their belief the attacks during the year on churches, along with the 2017 arson of the Assumption Roman Catholic Cathedral in Lalitpur and the 2017 shooting of the FNCN employee, represented an effort to foment panic among the Christian community. They also expressed concern about lack of police willingness to investigate the cases thoroughly. None of the arson cases had resulted in arrests by year's end.

Authorities made no significant progress in the 2016 case in which Banke District police filed charges against 28 individuals accused of participating in Hindu-Muslim clashes that led to the killing of two Muslims earlier that month. Twenty-five persons who were apprehended and arrested were subsequently released over the course of several months on bail of between 25,000 and 50,000 rupees (\$220 and \$450), pending their trial in the district court, which at year's end had not begun. Three other accused individuals remained at large. Muslim religious leaders again expressed disappointment in the court's decision to grant what they stated was a low amount of bail for murder charges. Separately, the District Administration Office granted one million rupees (\$9,000) to the families of each of the deceased.

In May police arrested local Hindu leader Dinesh Pandit, who uses the assumed name Sri Niwas Acharya, for trying to incite communal violence by staging an assassination attempt on himself. He reportedly orchestrated the shooting by his own bodyguard to incite a backlash against the non-Hindu community. Police arrested him at Tribhuvan International Airport while he attempted to flee to India after the arrest of his two alleged accomplices. Minority religious leaders expressed growing concern about the rise of Hindu nationalism and its implications for religious harmony.

Some leaders of religious minority groups stated some converts to other religions, including Hindus who had converted to Christianity, remained willing and able to state publicly their new religious affiliation. Some Christian leaders, however, reported that a number of converts to Christianity tried to conceal their faith from their families and local communities, mainly in areas outside of Kathmandu. *Morning Star News* reported some threats of violence against the Christian community on social media.

Some Muslim leaders continued not to accept converts to Islam, saying it would violate the law according to their interpretation. Instead, they continued to recommend that individuals who sought to convert travel to India to do so.

Local media published reports of alleged harmful practices by religious minorities that were disputed by local authorities, witnesses, and media. Throughout the year, the press covered alleged social disturbances caused by the spread of Christianity in rural areas, including harassment and “forced conversions.”

According to *Morning Star News*, local Hindus intimidated and threatened members of a church in Palpa District to the point the church closed down. The individuals accused the church’s pastor of converting villagers. The pastor stated that a local government official banned the church from meeting and said that his members then had to travel 31 miles to attend church. Members of civil society reported that while local residents convinced the church members to cancel one public program due to loudspeaker noise complaints, the church was not shuttered.

According to NGOs, Hindu priests and local high-caste residents continued to prevent Dalits, as members of a lower caste, from entering temples and sometimes prevented them from performing religious rites and participating in religious festivals. In 2017 media reported an attack on a Dalit for entering a temple in Saptari District. The victim, who suffered a broken arm among other injuries, stated police were slow to investigate the incident and take action against the perpetrators. According to police, the case was pending in the district court as of September.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Throughout the year, the Ambassador, embassy officers, and other U.S. government representatives expressed concerns to senior government officials and political leaders over restrictions on freedom of religion, including the rights to convert and to proselytize, posed by provisions in the constitution and the new criminal code. They continued to highlight the ways in which anticonversion laws could be used to arbitrarily restrict the right to the freedoms of religion and expression. Embassy officers and visiting senior U.S. government officials also raised concerns with government officials about the government’s restrictions on Tibetan Buddhists conducting peaceful religious activities, including celebrations of Losar (Tibetan New Year), the Dalai Lama’s birthday, and World Peace Day (which commemorates the Dalai Lama receiving the Nobel Peace Prize).

Following the church attacks in late spring, embassy officers visited the sites in various districts to investigate further and to convey support for religious minorities. Officers met with police at various levels to urge thorough investigations in these and related cases.

The Ambassador wrote opinion articles in local media on social inclusion for religious minorities, and the embassy regularly promoted religious freedom and tolerance on embassy social media platforms, as well as on the Ambassador's Twitter account.

Embassy officers met with Muslim religious leaders and Muslim journalists, including community radio producers, as part of an embassy grant program.

Embassy officers and other U.S. government representatives discussed with civil society and religious groups their concerns about access to burial grounds, public celebration of religious holidays, the prohibition against conversion, and verbal attacks on Christian communities by Hindu politicians.

Embassy officers frequently addressed religious diversity and tolerance in public speaking engagements at regional American Centers and civil society events. The embassy continued to provide financial assistance for the preservation and restoration of religious sites, including Buddhist *stupas* (shrines) and monasteries as well as several Hindu temples, and continued to promote religious tolerance in a program for underprivileged youth, including Muslim and Tibetan refugees, in Kathmandu.