

BHUTAN 2020 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. The government's Commission for Religious Organizations (CRO) approved 14 religious groups during the year, but none from religious minority groups. Hindu leaders cited continued public support for the construction of Hindu temples from the highest level of government, including the new temple in the capital in 2019. There were no reports of unregistered religious groups, including Christians, being unable to worship in private, although such groups were unable to organize publicly, own property, raise funds, conduct outreach activities, or import literature. The international Christian NGO Open Doors continued to list the country on its annual *World Watch List*. The report for 2021 (which covered events in 2020) alleged discrimination against Christians, stating that religious nationalism created broad pressure for citizens to follow Buddhism. Pastors cited acquiring permanent Christian burial plots as a continuing challenge. Leaders from the Hindu Dharmic Samudai, one of eight religious organizations on the board of the CRO, 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 continued societal pressure on individuals to participate in Buddhist traditions and practices. Open Doors reported, "All Bhutanese citizens are expected to be Buddhists. Anyone who converts to Christianity is watched with suspicion, and pressure is usually put on them to bring them back to their former religion."

The United States does not have formal diplomatic relations with the country or a diplomatic presence there. Officers from the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi engaged virtually with both government and nongovernment figures on issues including freedom of religious practice and the treatment of religious minorities. Unlike in

previous years, U.S. government officials were unable to visit the country during the year due to COVID-19 travel restrictions.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 782,000 (mid-year 2020 estimate). According to a 2012 report (the most recent) by the Pew Research Center, approximately 75 percent of the population follows either the Drukpa Kagyu or the Nyingma school of Buddhism, and Hindus make up approximately 23 percent of the total population. Hindus reside mostly in southern areas adjacent to India. The 2020 report by the World Christian Database estimates that Buddhists comprised 83 percent of the population and Hindus 11 percent in 2019. The government does not publish statistics on religious demography.

According to a Pew Research Center report in 2012 and the Open Doors 2021 *World Watch List*, estimates of the size of the Christian community range from 0.5 to 3.6 percent of the total population. Most Christians are concentrated in towns in the south. According to scholars, although traditional Bon practices are often combined with Buddhist practices, very few citizens adhere exclusively to this religious tradition. 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.

Most of Bhutan's foreign workers come from India. In 2019, India's Ministry of External Affairs estimated that 60,000 Indian nationals lived in the country and 8,000 to 10,000 additional temporary workers entered the country daily. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, some Indian residents left the country and entry of foreign workers was greatly limited. While there is no data on their religious affiliation, most foreign workers 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” is 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 for violations.

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 public religious services, 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. 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, who as of early 2020 was also 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 ex officio as secretary. Heads of Buddhist religious organizations and the Hindu Dharma Samudaya, a registered Hindu organization, 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

Open Doors continued to list the country on its annual *World Watch List* with respect to discrimination against Christians, stating that religious nationalism creates broad pressure for citizens to follow Buddhism, especially from family members who sometimes see converting to Christianity as bringing shame on the family and who disown Christian family members.

The CRO approved 14 religious groups during the year, but none were from religious minorities. There are approximately 140 Buddhist groups, two Hindu groups, and no Christian groups registered by the government.

The CRO continued not to approve the pending registration request of any church, which, according to Open Doors, Christians “are technically worshipping illegally,” although Christian pastors reported they were generally able to worship in private. The government did not offer any official explanation to these groups for not registering them.

There were no reports of authorities threatening or forcing house churches to close during the year. One pastor reported that some new home Christian fellowships opened during the year. He said that he was not aware of any cases of the government persecuting religious minorities in the country during the year, in part because COVID-19 restrictions limited gatherings and movement. Open Doors’ 2021 report noted that “Buddhist monks oppose the presence of Christians. In general, local officials overlook this opposition.”

Christian pastors cited acquiring permanent Christian burial plots as a continuing challenge. The community was allowed to purchase one small plot of land for burials in 2019, but access was restricted, and government officials continued to press the community to cremate their dead instead of burying them “due to lack of space in the small country.” 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 on “inducements” to conversion could be used to penalize the celebration of Christian religious services if they appeared to be proselytizing, which is illegal.

Open Doors' 2021 report again said that Christians often faced difficulties in obtaining "nonobjection certificates" from local authorities that were required for loan and employment applications and property registration.

The King supported Hindu temples by allotting them land and funding and by participating in Hindu festivals. The King has also participated in the opening ceremony of a new Hindu temple in 2019. Hindu leaders reported increasing religious acceptance, in part due to the King's public outreach to the Hindu community.

The government continued its financial assistance for the construction of Buddhist temples and shrines as well as funding for Buddhist monks and monasteries. According to Minority Rights Group International, authorities gave Buddhist temples priority over Hindu temples in the licensing process.

The India-based Hindu organization Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), an affiliate of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), said that Hindu groups took a "cautious policy" toward the government due to the government's delay in formally recognizing additional Hindu organizations. VHP said, however, that the government had a "better relationship with the predominantly Nepalese Hindus."

Some courts and other government institutions remained housed within or adjacent to Buddhist monasteries. Some religious groups stated that government ceremonies continued to involve mandatory Buddhist prayer rituals.

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 characterized persecution of Christians as "very high." According to Open Doors' report for 2021, "Buddhism is engrained in daily life in Bhutan, and anyone who leaves Buddhism to follow Jesus is viewed with suspicion by neighbors, friends, and even immediate family." The report said that "family members go to great lengths to bring the [Christian] convert back to his or her original 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. Unlike in previous

years, due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, U.S. officials were unable to visit the country during the year. Officers from the embassy in New Delhi, however, engaged virtually with government officials on issues including freedom of religious practices and the treatment of religious minorities. Embassy officers also remained in contact with religious leaders on relations between religious groups and the government and the impact of COVID-19 on religious practices.