



Religion

Population

Area

- Buddhists : **56.1%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **18.3%**
- Agnostics : **15.9%**
- Muslims : **5.0%**
- Atheists : **2.3%**
- Christians : **1.8%**
- Others : **0.6%**

3,006,000

1,564,116 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

In the last two years, Mongolia has seen little constitutional or legal change with respect to freedom of religion. Following the collapse of the USSR in 1989, the end of Soviet domination brought a return to religious freedom. Mongolia's constitution, adopted on 13th January 1992, guarantees all fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of religion, and officially upholds the principle of separation of the state and religion. Although the Buddhism practised by Mongolians^[1] has no status as an official religion, Mongolian law nevertheless asserts that the government must “respect” Buddhism as the majority religion – an affirmation justified by the need to preserve the unity of the country and defend Mongolian history and culture. The law also states that the respect due to Buddhism by the state “cannot prevent a citizen from practising another religion”.

The promise of religious freedom, seen when the country came into being in the 1990s, has not been realised. Instead, a restrictive and intrusive bureaucracy has sought to restrain religious communities deemed “foreign” to the national culture. Mongolia's Christians have suffered particularly.

Religious communities in Mongolia are treated in the same way as NGOs. They are forced to meet many complex regulations and administrative requirements. They must register with a state agency, the General Authority for Intellectual Property and State Registration. Because the law is unclear about how long registration certificates issued by this body remain valid, it is, in fact, local governments that determine their duration.

In practice, religious organisations are obliged to renew their registration certificates every year. To do so, they must apply to six different administrative bodies at the local and national levels. This process is long, tedious and unpredictable, as some provinces are more reluctant than others to provide registration certificates.

Another extremely restrictive condition which applies to all foreign organisations, and thus to religious communities, is the requirement of a minimum percentage of Mongolian employees among their staff. This percentage varies between 25 percent and 95 percent depending on the sector of activity. Each year, a list of required percentages is published; most religious organisations are automatically subjected to the maximum quota of 95 percent of local employees. Many religious organisations have objected to this system as much of their staff and funding originate largely outside of Mongolia. The Catholic Church is an exception because, unlike almost all other religious organisations with NGO status and mandatory 95 percent local staffing, the Catholic Church has managed to obtain a quota of only 75 percent.

| Incidents

The Dalai Lama visited Ulaanbaatar in November 2016. At the invitation of the Gandantegchinlen Monastery, one of the main centres of Tibetan Buddhism, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists spent four days in the Mongolian capital. The government of the People's Republic of China, Mongolia's southern neighbour, warned the government in Ulaanbaatar that it would face consequences if it allowed such a visit (Communist China considers the Dalai Lama a "separatist"). Following the Dalai Lama's departure, the Chinese government retaliated with economic measures against Mongolia: the land border between the two countries was blocked for several days; additional taxes were imposed on imports from Mongolia; bilateral meetings were postponed; and Chinese government loans were cancelled at a time when the Mongolian government's budget was already overstretched and the country was lagging in economic growth.^[2] After asserting that their constitution upheld the right to religious freedom and therefore the right of Mongolian citizens to welcome the religious leaders of their choice, the Mongolian government was forced to make amends and concede to Beijing that the Dalai Lama would no longer be permitted to enter the country. On 20th December 2016, Mongolian Foreign Minister Tsend Munkh-Orgil told the Mongolian newspaper Unuudur that "Under this current government, the Dalai Lama will not be invited to Mongolia, even for religious reasons."^[2] As of October 2017, Mr Munkh-Orgil is no longer foreign minister and the government has changed, and officially the question of a visit by the Dalai Lama to Mongolia is no longer an issue.^[3]

The government's attitude toward religions other than Buddhism has not changed in recent years. In the 1990s the government appealed to Christian Churches, including the Catholic Church, to set up charities and engage in social outreach in a country where the needs for development were substantial. Since 2010, attitudes if not the laws have hardened, at least towards religious organisations regarded as "foreign". The hiring quota for local staff weighs heavily on the finances of recently established organisations or those led mainly by foreign personnel.^[4]

Under Mongolian law, the head of a religious organisation must be a Mongolian national. Religious communities, especially Christian ones, without native Mongolian clergy, can own land only if the title deed is held by a Mongolian citizen. Registering these titles and religious depends at least in part on the goodwill of the administration. The Central Province, with its strong Buddhist tradition, seems less disposed to allow the opening of Christian churches, whereas other provinces, such as that of Erdenet,^[5] remain more open to foreigners.

| Prospects for freedom of religion

As it faces serious economic difficulties, Mongolia cannot escape the influence of its neighbour, China. Freedoms gained in the aftermath of the fall of communism seem to be well established and in this respect, freedom of religion seems to be much better respected in Mongolia than in China. However, economic difficulties and rapid social change have prompted local authorities to distrust religions deemed new to the country, such as Christianity, both Protestant and Catholic. Despite these institutional and cultural obstructions, and even in the face of rapid secularisation in Mongolia, Christian communities in particular continue to expand.

Endnotes / Sources

- [1] Mongolian Buddhism is a branch of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, with strong local shamanic influences that go back centuries. It became the state religion of the Mongol Empire in the 13th century after a visit by the Tibetan Dalai Lama Sakya Pakya. Like other religions, after it was almost completely wiped out by the totalitarian Stalinist regime that seized power in Mongolia in the 1920s, Buddhism is currently experiencing a renaissance and it is acknowledged as the spiritual tradition of more than half of all Mongolians.
- [2] Bolor Lkhaajav, 'China Needs to Get Over the Dalai Lama's Visit to Mongolia', *The Diplomat*, 30 December 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/12/china-needs-to-get-over-the-dalai-lamas-visit-to-mongolia/>, (accessed 21st February 2018).
- [3] 'Mongolia says Dalai Lama won't be invited again', *Reuters*, 22nd December 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mongolia-china/mongolia-says-dalai-lama-wont-be-invited-again-idUSKBN14B0N5>, (accessed 24th February 2018).
- [4] 'Mission et évangélisation : les défis actuels d'une Église naissante', *Églises d'Asie*, 15 September 2016, <http://eblasie.mepasie.org/asia-du-nord-est/mongolie/2015-09-15-mission-et-evangelisation-les-defis-actuels-d2019une-Église-naissante>, (accessed 21st February 2018).
- [5] 'Ouverture d'une mission catholique à Erdenet', *Églises d'Asie*, 15th June 2016 <http://eblasie.mepasie.org/asia-du-nord-est/mongolie/2016-06-15-ouverture-d2019une-mission-catholique-a-erdenet>, (accessed 21st February 2018).