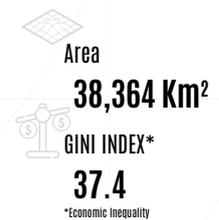
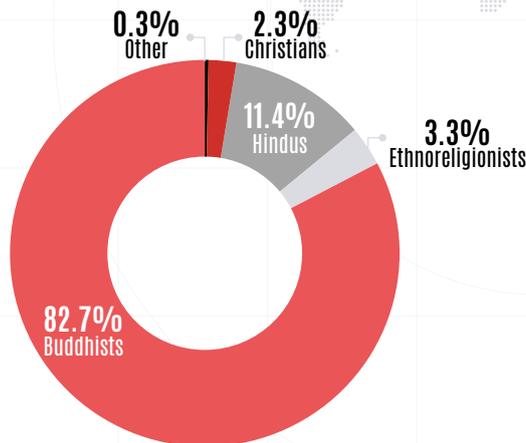




BHUTAN

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

The 2008 Bhutanese constitution recognises that “Buddhism is the spiritual heritage of Bhutan” and that all religious institutions have the responsibility “to promote the spiritual heritage of the country” (Article 3, 1), while also “ensuring that religion remains separate from politics” (Article 3, 3).¹ At the same time, the same charter states that Bhutanese citizens “shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion,” and prohibits “coercion or inducement” of faith (Article 7, 4).²

Reconciling these two principles is difficult. In fact, the constitutional principle of religious freedom is still relatively new in Bhutan, coming after centuries of absolute monarchy and Buddhist clerical rule. The Election Commission of Bhutan has upheld the principle of separation between state and religion³ under the Religious Organisations Act of 2007⁴ to “ensure that religious institutions and personalities remain above politics” (Article 13, e).⁵

Although the principle of religious freedom is found in the constitution, proselytising is forbidden.⁶ NGOs,

such as the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), have expressed concern that the country’s anti- “inducement” legal language is “tantamount to anti-conversion legislation.”⁷ Non-Buddhist religious personnel are not allowed into the country, and non-Buddhist religions must be practised privately.⁸ Non-Buddhist religious groups are not allowed to own property⁹ or have cemeteries.¹⁰

The law requires that religious groups obtain licences in order to hold public religious gatherings. Christian churches have applied for registration with the Commission for Religious Organisations (CRO), but are still waiting for approval. There is nevertheless a recognised Hindu body, the Hindu Dharma Samudaya of Bhutan, which has been able to construct temples.¹¹

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Vajrayāna Buddhism, a variant of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, is Bhutan’s state religion.¹² Buddhism and its large clergy (more than 12,000)¹³ play a central public role in Bhutan’s life. With respect to religious freedom, as the incidents reflect, religious matters have not changed very much over the past two years.

There is no verifiable information concerning the oppression of non-Buddhists, but some missionaries have related negative experiences. Open Doors, for example, has reported instances of social pressure on Christian converts and discrimination at work, again none of which can be independently verified by third parties.¹⁴ Pastor Tandin Wangyal, in prison since 2014, confirms that local authorities often discriminate and persecute Christians but this varies according to the region of the country.¹⁵ Bhutanese Christians go abroad, for example to neighbouring India, to receive a religious education.¹⁶ In the period under review, there were no reports of violent incidents associated with religious discrimination in Bhutan.¹⁷

Hindus too have experienced prejudice, most notably in the case of the Bhutanese Lhotshampa refugees. The Lhotshampas are a mostly Hindu ethnic group of Nepali origin who settled in southern Bhutan in the early 20th century; however, in the 1990s the government began a policy of “Bhutanisation” targeting the Lhotshampas.¹⁸ More than a hundred thousand were expelled and became stateless ending up in refugee camps in Nepal. Since talks with Bhutan failed in 2003, the United Nations has helped over 112,800 Lhotshampa refugees resettle in other countries, such as the United States, Canada, and Australia (Nepal has refused taking the refugees).¹⁹ In 2019 Nepal resumed talks with Bhutan over the repatriation of the remaining 6,500 refugees, but as a December demonstration held by Lhotsham-

pas in front of a UN office in Nepal indicates, repatriation efforts are yet to be successful.²⁰

Bhutan has dealt relatively well with the COVID-19 pandemic.²¹ Much of this success is due to its quick response, closing its borders for two weeks after its first confirmed case, a 76-year-old American tourist, on 6th March.²² The country is now reopening and largely returning to normal, albeit with fewer visitors and more strictly regulated tourism.

PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Although violations of religious freedom in Bhutan have not been reported during the period under review, the application of the new constitution excluding non-Buddhist religions does not bode well for freedom of religion. Discrimination is likely to grow and become more commonplace. Efforts to solve the Lhotshampa issue are unlikely to get the government’s attention. Bhutan’s de facto discrimination against non-Buddhists has certainly contributed to this situation, which is likely to continue.²³

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