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2013 International Religious Freedom Report - Nepal

Executive Summary

The 2007 interim constitution protects religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The interim constitution officially declares the country a secular state and prohibits proselytizing. The government, however, has not prosecuted citizens or expelled foreigners for this offense. On at least one occasion, the government did not allow a Christian burial in the cemetery at the Pashupati Temple. Six people were sentenced to six years in prison for eating cow meat. Members of minority religious groups complained about the dominance of high-caste Hindus in prominent political and government positions. Hindu nationalist and royalist parties, however, complained that the role of the Hindu religion in public life has diminished.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and one case of large scale intergroup violence, but adherents of the country's members of different religious groups generally coexisted peacefully and respected places of worship. Caste-based discrimination was illegal and temple access for lower castes improved in some areas. Nevertheless,

caste discrimination continued at some Hindu temples, where Hindu priests forbade members of the Dalit (formerly called “untouchable”) community from entering.

U.S. embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with government officials. The Ambassador hosted two interfaith iftars and maintained regular contact with Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Sikh, and other religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 30.4 million (July 2013 estimate). According to the 2011 census, Hindus constitute 81.3 percent of the population, Buddhists 9 percent, and Muslims (the majority of whom are Sunni) 4.4 percent. Groups constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Kirats (an indigenous religion with Hindu influence) and Christians. Members of minority religious groups have asserted their numbers were significantly undercounted. Many individuals adhere to a syncretic faith encompassing elements of Hinduism, Buddhism, and traditional folk practices, and is not easily captured by the census data. Christian groups state their numbers increased significantly over the past several years, with some stating the percentage of Christians is close to 5 percent of the population, or between one and two million individuals.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The 2007 interim constitution provides for religious freedom; however, it specifically prohibits proselytizing. It also declares the country a secular state. A new Constituent Assembly was elected in November and is tasked with drafting a permanent constitution within a year.

The interim constitution maintains that no one shall be discriminated against based on caste. The law criminalizes acts of caste-based discrimination in public and private spaces, including places of worship.

There are no specific laws favoring the Hindu majority, nor does the government control the expression of Hinduism; however, the law prohibits the killing or intended killing of cows. Penalties for violating this law include twelve years in prison.

The law allows personal conversion to a different religion, but the interim constitution and criminal code prohibit proselytizing, which is punishable by fines, imprisonment, or, for foreigners, expulsion. There were, however, no reports of prosecutions or expulsions.

The government permits religious groups to establish and operate their own schools. According to the Department of Education, approximately 1,203 Muslim religious schools (madrassahs) are registered with district education offices, an increase of 368 during the year; however, some Muslim groups claim there are as many as 6,000 madrassahs. Muslims may freely participate in the Hajj.

The government does not require religious institutions to register, but religious schools seeking government funding must register with local district administration offices (part of the home ministry) and supply information about their funding sources. The government funds the salary of one teacher for each registered religious school. The Department of Education prepares curricula for the registered schools.

There are no restrictions on the sale or possession of religious literature.

Government Practices

On July 4, the Ilam District Court sentenced six people to six years in prison each for eating cow meat. The defendants said they did not kill the cow, but that it died after falling off a cliff.

The government-funded Pashupati Temple Trust maintained restrictions preventing Christian burials in a common cemetery behind the Pashupati Hindu Temple in Kathmandu, but allowed burials of individuals from other religious groups, such as non-Hindu indigenous faiths. Because of the prohibition, some Christians reportedly drove several hours outside of Kathmandu to conduct secret burials in non-populated areas. Many Christian communities outside of the Kathmandu Valley were able to buy land for cemeteries, or the government has provided them land. Some Christians, however, indicated it was often difficult to start a new cemetery due to opposition from the local Hindu community.

Although there remained no registration requirements for religious groups, Christian and Muslim religious organizations stated that, unless registered, they were prevented from owning land as an institution, an important practical step for establishing churches, mosques, synagogues, or burial sites. Congregations representing each of these groups, whether registered or not, operated freely and without obstruction by having individual congregation members register on the institution's behalf. Some Muslim leaders criticized the policy of requiring registration with local district administration offices in order to seek government funding as discriminatory, citing the difficulty of the registration process and the general lack of resources from the government.

In a change from the previous year, government authorities approved a celebration at a Kathmandu monastery for the Dalai Lama's birthday July 6. Approximately 8,000 individuals attended.

There were no officially recognized foreign missionaries; however, dozens of Christian missionary hospitals, welfare organizations, and schools have operated for decades. These organizations did not proselytize and operated free of government interference. Foreign workers in the missionary hospitals and schools entered the country with visas designating them as technical workers for local or international nongovernmental organizations sponsoring the hospitals and schools. The government did not expel any foreign workers for proselytizing during the year, and missionaries reported they attempted to keep their activities discreet. Many foreign Christian organizations had direct ties to local churches and sponsored clergy for religious training abroad.

Members of minority religious groups expressed concern over a perceived lack of representation in top political and government positions, as well as a lack of government resources to support religious sites belonging to minority religious groups. Muslim leaders asserted their community was among the most marginalized, lacking educational opportunities and insufficiently represented in government.

Although public schools did not teach religious beliefs, most had a statue of Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of learning, on their grounds. Some began the day with a Hindu prayer to the goddess.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Adherents of different religious groups, however, generally coexisted peacefully and respected places of worship. Hindus and Buddhists generally respected each other's shrines. Buddha's birthplace at Lumbini, in the southern part of the country, was an important pilgrimage site.

On August 9, a large group of Hindus attacked Muslims in Siraha district in the southern part of the country, setting several houses afire and causing multiple injuries. The attack was allegedly in response to reports Muslim youth had sexually harassed female Hindu pilgrims. After the attacks, community leaders met and reached an accord designed to prevent future violence. The police initially arrested 28 individuals for participation in the attacks and for harassment, but after the community leaders' accord, released all but one, who was charged with possession of an illegal firearm.

Those who chose to convert to other religions, in particular Hindu citizens who converted to Islam or Christianity, were generally unafraid to state publicly their new religious affiliation.

Although prohibited under the interim constitution, and despite the government's efforts to protect the rights of disadvantaged castes, societal discrimination against members of lower castes, particularly Dalits, remained widespread and restricted their religious freedom. Local villagers and Hindu priests often prevented Dalits from entering temples, performing religious rites, or participating in cultural and religious festivals. Other religious groups did not practice caste discrimination.

Members of Garayala Village Development Committee in Rukum district, in which many high-caste individuals live, continued to support a Dalit man as the priest of their local Hindu temple. Villagers stated they chose the priest because he could recite Hindu scripture, and he conducted hundreds of marriages and other religious rituals every year.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officers closely monitored religious freedom and raised religious freedom issues with the government, political party leaders, and civil society. The Ambassador hosted iftars in Kathmandu and in Biratnagar in southeastern Nepal, in which Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and government officials participated. Embassy officers maintained contact with Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Sikh, and other religious groups.

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