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## **Christian in Bhutan imprisoned for showing film on Christ**

Compass Direct (18.10.2010) / HRWF (20.10.2010) - <http://www.hrwf.org> - A court in predominantly Buddhist Bhutan has sentenced a Christian to three years in prison for "attempting to promote civil unrest" by screening films on Christianity.

A local court in Gelephu convicted Prem Singh Gurung, a 40-year-old ethnic Nepalese citizen from Sarpang district in south Bhutan, on Oct. 6, according to the government-run daily Kuensel.

Gurung was arrested four months ago after local residents complained that he was showing Christian films in Gonggaon and Simkharkha villages in Jigmecholing block. Gurung invited villagers to watch Nepali movies, and between each feature he showed films on Christianity.

Government attorneys could not prove "beyond reasonable doubt" that Gurung promoted civil unrest, and therefore "he was charged with an attempt to promote civil unrest," the daily reported.

Gurung was also charged with violation of the Bhutan Information, Communication and Media Act of 2006. Sections 105(1) and 110 of this law require that authorities examine all films before public screening.

A Christian from Bhutan's capital, Thimphu, told Compass that the conviction of Gurung disturbed area villagers.

While Gurung has the right to appeal, it remained unclear if he had the resources to take that course.

Both Gonggaon and Simkharkha are virtually inaccessible. It can take up to 24 and 48 hours to reach the villages from the nearest road.

"Both villages do not have electricity," the daily reported. "But Prem Singh Gurung, with the help of some people, is believed to have carried a projector and a generator to screen the movies in the village."

Over 75 percent of the 683,407 people in Bhutan are Buddhist, mainly from western and eastern parts. Hindus, mostly ethnic Nepalese from southern Bhutan, are estimated to be around 22 percent of the population.

It is also estimated that around 6,000 Bhutanese, mostly from south, are Christian in this landlocked nation between India and China. However, their presence is not officially acknowledged in the country. As a result, they practice their faith from the confines of their homes, with no Christian institution officially registered.

Buddhism is the state religion in Bhutan, and the government is mandated to protect its culture and religion according to the 2008 constitution. As in other parts of South Asia, people in Bhutan mistakenly believe that Christianity is a Western faith and that missionaries give monetary benefits to convert people from other religions.

Yesterday's Kuensel published an opinion piece by a Bhutanese woman from New York who described herself as "an aspiring Buddhist" condemning both the conviction of Gurung and Christian "tactics."

"Although we may not like the tactics used by the Christians to proselytize or 'sell' their religion to impoverished and vulnerable groups, let's not lose sight of the bigger picture, in terms of religious tolerance, and what constitutes 'promoting civil unrest,'" wrote Sonam Ongmo. "If we truly want to establish ourselves as a well-functioning democracy, with equal rights for all, let's start with one of the fundamental ones – the right to choose one's faith. We have nothing to worry about Buddhism losing ground to Christianity, but we will if, as a predominantly Buddhist state, we start to deny people the right to their faith."

While her view is representative of liberal Buddhists in Bhutan, a reader's response in a forum on Kuensel's website reflected the harder line.

"These Christians are a cancer to our society," wrote a reader identifying himself as The Last Dragon. "They had crusades after crusades – we don't need that. We are very happy with Buddhism. Once Christianity is perfect – as they always claim [it] to be, then let's see."

In July, the government of Bhutan proposed an amendment in the Penal Code of Bhutan which would punish "proselytizing" that "uses coercion or other forms of inducement." (See, "Buddhist Bhutan Proposes 'Anti-Conversion' Law," July 21.)

Christian persecution arose in Bhutan in the 1980s, when the king began a "one-nation, one-people" campaign to "protect the country's sovereignty and cultural integrity." Ethnic Nepalese, however, protested the move on grounds of discrimination. Authorities responded militarily, leading to the expulsion or voluntary migration of over 100,000 ethnic Nepalese, many of whom were secret Christians, to the Nepal side of the border in Jhapa in the early 1990s.

An absolute monarchy for over 100 years, Bhutan became a democratic, constitutional monarchy in March 2008, in accordance with the wish of former King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who served from 1972 to 2006. Since the advent of democracy, the country has brought in many reforms. It is generally believed that the government is gradually giving more freedom to its citizens.

The present king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, and Prime Minister Lyonchen Jigme Thinley, are respected by almost all Bhutanese and are seen as benevolent rulers.

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## **Buddhist Bhutan proposes 'anti-conversion' law**

***Already suppressed Christians say bill is designed to control growth***

By Vishal Arora

Compass Direct (21.07.2010) / HRWF (20.07.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Christians in this Himalayan nation who are still longing to openly practice their faith were disheartened this month when the government proposed the kind of "anti-conversion" law that other nations have used as a pretext for falsely accusing Christians of "coercion."

The amendment bill would punish "proselytizing" that "uses coercion or other forms of inducement" - vaguely enough worded, Christians fear, that vigilantes could use it to jail them for following the commands of Christ to feed, clothe and otherwise care for the poor.

"Now, under section 463 [of the Penal Code of Bhutan], a defendant shall be guilty of the offense of proselytization if the defendant uses coercion or other forms of inducement to cause the conversion of a person from one religion or faith to another," reported the government-run Kuensel newspaper on July 9.

"There was always a virtual anti-conversion law in place, but now it is on paper too," said a senior pastor from Thimphu on condition of anonymity. "Seemingly it is aimed at controlling the growth of Christianity."

Kuenlay Tshering, a member of Bhutan's Parliament and the chairperson of its Legislative Council, told Compass that the new section is consonant with Article 7(4) of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, which states, "A Bhutanese citizen shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. No person shall be compelled to belong to another faith by means of coercion or inducement."

He said that the National Council had proposed that offenses under the proposal be classified as misdemeanors, punishable by one to less than three years in prison.

Tshering said that the amendment bill "may be passed during the next session of Parliament, after the National Assembly deliberates on it in the winter session."

Asked if he was aware that similar "anti-conversion" laws in neighboring India had been misused to harass Christians through vague terms of "inducement," he said he was not.

Authorities usually act on complaints by local residents against Christian workers, so frivolous complaints can lead to their arrest, said another pastor who requested anonymity.

Of the 683,407 people in Bhutan, over 75 percent are Buddhist, mainly from the west and the east. Hindus, mostly ethnic Nepalese from southern Bhutan, are estimated to be around 22 percent of the population.

There are around 6,000 Christians, mostly ethnic Nepalese, but there is neither a church building nor a registered Christian institution. The Bible, however, has been translated into the national language, Dzongkha, as well as into Nepali.

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion, but the government has not officially recognized the presence of Christians, whose practice of faith remains confined to their homes.

The Drukpa Kagyue school of Mahayana Buddhism is the state religion, with Hinduism dominant in the south, according to Bhutan's official website, which adds, "Some residues of Bon, animism and shamanism still exist in some pockets of the country," but makes no mention of Christianity.

Still, since Bhutan became a democracy in 2008 after its first-ever elections - following more than 100 years of absolute monarchy - people have increasingly exercised their freedom, including religious choice.

### **'Why More Religions?'**

Home and Culture Minister Lyonpo Minjur Dorji told Compass that Bhutan's government had "no problems" with Christianity or any other faith.

"But Bhutan is a small country, with a little more than 600,000 people, and a majority of them are Buddhist," Dorji said. "We have Hindus, also mainly in southern parts. So why do we need more religions?"

Buddhism is closely linked with political and social life in Bhutan. Dorji's office sits in a gigantic monastery in Thimphu known as Tashichho Dzong. Buddhism unites and brings people together, Dorji said, explaining that the social life of a village revolves around its dzong (monastery).

Dorji said India's multi-religious society had led to tensions and bloodshed.

"India can survive riots and unrest," he said, "but Bhutan may not, because it is a small country between two giants [India and China]."

With leaders who have been proud that they have not allowed it to be colonized, Bhutan historically has been keenly concerned about its survival. Bhutan's people see their distinct culture, rather than the military, as having protected the country's sovereignty. And it is no coincidence that Dorji's portfolio includes both internal security and preservation of culture.

The constitution, adopted in July 2008, also requires the state to protect Bhutan's cultural heritage and declares that Buddhism is the spiritual heritage of Bhutan.

A government official who requested anonymity said that, as Tibet went to China and Sikkim became a state in India, "now which of the two countries will get Bhutan?"

This concern is prevalent among the Bhutanese, he added.

Sikkim, now a state in India's northeast, was a Buddhist kingdom with indigenous Bhotia and Lepcha people groups as its subjects. But Hindus from Nepal migrated to Sikkim for work and gradually outnumbered the local Buddhists. In 1975, a referendum was held to decide if Sikkim, then India's protectorate, should become an official state of the country. Since over 75 percent of the people in Sikkim were Nepalese - who knew that democracy would mean majority-rule - they voted for its incorporation into India.

Bhutan and India's other smaller neighbors saw it as brazen annexation. And it is believed that Sikkim's "annexation" made Bhutan wary of the influence of India.

In the 1980s, Bhutan's king began a one-nation-one-people campaign to protect its sovereignty and cultural integrity, which was discriminatory to the ethnic Nepalese, who protested. Their non-compliance, however, resulted in a harsh crackdown by authorities, leading to the expulsion or voluntary migration of over 100,000 ethnic Nepalese, many of whom were Christians, to the Nepal side of the border in Jhapa in the early 1990s.

"Bhutan did not want to become another Sikkim," said a local resident, explaining why the government did not tolerate the protests.

Bhutan is also rigorous in implementing its laws related to the use of the national language, the national dress code and the uniform architectural standards throughout the country to strengthen its cultural integrity. Bhutanese men are required to wear the gho, a knee-length robe tied at the waist by a cloth belt, when they go to work or attend a public function. Women have to wear the kira, an ankle-length dress clipped at one shoulder and tied at the waist. Non-compliance can lead to fine and imprisonment.

### **Brighter Future**

One hopeful pastor said he expects the government to officially acknowledge the existence of Christianity in Bhutan in the near future.

"Religious freedom will be good for both Christians and the government," he said. "If Christians are not officially acknowledged, who will the government go to if it wants to implement an executive decision related to religious communities?"

Explaining the reason for his hope, he recalled an incident in the Punakha area in January, when a house under construction was demolished after rumors that it was used as a church.

"The house owner, a Christian, went to his majesty [King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck] and told him he was not constructing a church but would have worship with other believers on Sundays," the pastor said. "The king allowed him to build the house."

He also said that a delegation of Christians met with Prime Minister Lyonchen Jigme Thinley in May 2009, who reassured them that there would be more freedom soon.

Christianity is gradually growing, but through word-of-mouth - testimonies of those who have received healing from sickness - and not public preaching, he said, adding that Christians needed to understand and be patient with the government, "which cannot and should not make changes or give freedom overnight."

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## **Why Bhutan's royalists fear Christianity**

### ***Social, political factors behind country's reluctance to allow Christianity to grow***

CDN Compass Direct (01.02.2010) / HRWF (04.03.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Bars, pubs and discos have become legal in Bhutan - a cause of concern for the older generation - but construction of worship buildings other than Buddhist or Hindu temples is still prohibited.

The prohibition remains in force even though Christians abide by Bhutan's codes of conduct, speaking the Dzongkha language as well as the Nepali language at church gatherings, and wearing the national dress.

The National Assembly of Bhutan banned the practice of non-Buddhist and non-Hindu religions through edicts in 1969 and in 1979. But Christians do meet for Sunday worship, with attendance of more than 100 Christians in an underground church not unusual.

Why are Christians seen as a greater threat to the culture of the nation than the "democracy disco culture," as one government official described the emerging subculture

among the Bhutanese youth? It is believed that Christianity will create religious tensions in the country.

"There are reasons why Christianity is not being tolerated in the country," said a former high government official who requested anonymity. "Look at the communal tensions in India and Nepal. Christianity can divide the Bhutanese society as well."

He mentioned two incidents that appeared in the Bhutanese press last year, one in which 13 Christians allegedly hanged a woman they had accused of being a witch, and a suicide by a Hindu man who reportedly left a note saying his Christian wife and children were pressuring him to convert.

Christians here said these were isolated incidents that they strongly condemned.

"A majority of believers in Bhutan are not educated and are from lower economic backgrounds," said the pastor of an underground church. "When open preaching is not allowed, this is what happens."

Sound Christian teaching remains lacking, he said. There is a tremendous need for good Christian teaching and general education among the Christians in Bhutan, said the pastor.

"But little can be done given the restrictions we face here."

Christians are only allowed to pray if someone is sick among their acquaintances, he added.

The government also fears that Christianity could cause societal tensions because of the general misconception that Christians lure others to the faith with money; converts are viewed with suspicion, said a government official on condition of anonymity.

"There should be one religion in one nation," said the official, adding that religious freedom should be allowed only after educating people.

### **Threat from within**

Bhutanese officials are no strangers to religious conflict.

"You must also understand that the kind of Buddhism practiced in Bhutan is a minority sect within the two Buddhist divisions," said the former government official.

A majority of Buddhists in Bhutan practice Vajrayāna Buddhism, also known as Tantric Buddhism, and belong to the larger Mahayana sect, one of the two major divisions of the religion along with the Theravada sect.

Theravada Buddhism has a widespread following in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asian countries, including Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Mahayana is practiced in a few East Asian countries, including Japan.

Unlike Theravada, which is more individualistic in its motivation, Mahayana Buddhism involves an aspiration to achieve enlightenment not only for one's own sake, but for the sake of all "sentient" beings.

"There is a perceived threat to the Buddhist sect in Bhutan from the more powerful Theravada division," said the source, without divulging more about the clash within Buddhism. "In such a scenario, how can you expect the government to willingly open doors to Christianity, which too is a threat?"

Of Bhutan's more than 670,000 people, Christians are estimated to range in number between 3,000 and 6,000. Around 75 percent of the people practice Buddhism, and roughly 22 percent are Hindus, mostly of Nepali origin.

### **Monarchy and Buddhism**

Religion is so closely linked to the monarchy in Bhutan that one cannot exist without the other.

The national flag of Bhutan, which consists of a white dragon over a yellow and orange background, also has religion in it. While the yellow half represents civil and political powers of the King, the orange signifies monastic traditions of Buddha's teachings.

The religious link is protected in the new constitution, which was adopted in March 2008. Article 2 notes that the dual powers of religion and politics shall be unified in the person of the king, "who, as a Buddhist, shall be the upholder of the Chhoe-sid," the traditional dual system of governance characterized by the sharing of power between the religious and political heads of the country.

Given that the king embodies religious and political authority, the common people worship him.

Additionally, Buddhism is woven into the national fabric. Bhutan is the only country in the world that employs a "Gross National Happiness" (GNH) equation to measure its people's level of happiness, and the GNH assumes that all citizens are Buddhist. Respondents to the GNH survey are asked questions concerning "spiritual activities like meditation and prayers, and consideration of karmic effects in daily life."

The introduction of democracy in Bhutan did not involve disturbing the religious and cultural status quo. While former King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who served from 1972 to 2006, brought democracy to Bhutan without any demand for it, people believe his intentions were far from transforming the country into a full democracy.

It is believed that the political turmoil in neighboring Nepal partly influenced King Singye Wangchuck's decision to make the country, at least on paper, a constitutional monarchy after over 100 years of absolute monarchy. A decade-long civil war led by the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist – which took more than 12,000 lives – is believed to be behind the abolition of the royal parliamentary system and the adoption of a socialist republic in Nepal. In 2006 the then-king of Nepal, Gyanendra, agreed to relinquish sovereign power to the people.

All sources in Bhutan confirmed that the present king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck (selected in 2006 but not crowned until 2008), was still the supreme ruler. Perhaps this is why both the ruling Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (Bhutan Peace and Prosperity) Party and the opposition People's Democratic Party are royalists.

Pictures of kings of Bhutan are found everywhere in the country – in homes, shops, hotels, underground churches and on street walls. Many large posters with the kings' pictures carrying the inscription "Kings of our Hearts" can be seen along the streets. Even public buses have "Our Kings Forever" painted on them.

"But you cannot expect things to change overnight," said the former government official. "It's not wise to allow development without any bridle. Things are improving slowly.

Added an optimistic source, "Freedom in the real sense of the word and in all spheres is bound to come to Bhutan. It's just a matter of time."



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## **Anti-Christian sentiment marks journey for Bhutan's exiles**

***Forced from Buddhist homeland, dangers arise in Hindu-majority Nepal***

By Sudeshna Sarkar

Compass Direct (23.02.2010) / HRWF (24.02.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Thrust from their homes in Bhutan after Buddhist rulers embarked on an ethnic and religious purge, Christian refugees in Nepal face hostilities from Hindus and others.

In Sunsari district in southeastern Nepal, a country that is more than 80 percent Hindu, residents from the uneducated segments of society are especially apt to attack Christians, said Purna Kumal, district coordinator for Awana Clubs International, which runs 41 clubs in refugee camps to educate girls about the Bible.

"In Itahari, Christians face serious trouble during burials," Kumal told Compass. "Last month, a burial party was attacked by locals who dug up the grave and desecrated it." Earlier this month, he added, a family in the area expelled one of its members from their home because he became a Christian.

Bhutan began expelling almost one-eighth of its citizens for being of Nepali origin or practicing faiths other than Buddhism in the 1980s. The purge lasted into the 1990s.

"Christians, like Hindus and others, were told to leave either their faith or the country," said Gopi Chandra Silwal, who pastors a tiny church for Bhutanese refugees in a refugee camp in Sanischare, a small village in eastern Nepal's Morang district. "Many chose to leave their homeland."

Persecution in Bhutan led to the spread of Christianity in refugee camps in Nepal. Though exact figures are not available, refugee Simon Gazmer estimates there are about 7,000-8,000 Christians in the camps – out of a total refugee population of about 85,000 – with many others having left for other countries. There are 18 churches of various faiths in the camps, he said.

"Faith-healing was an important factor in the spread of Christianity in the camps," said Gazmer, who belongs to Believers' Church and is awaiting his turn to follow five members of his family to Queensland, Australia. "A second reason is the high density in the camps."

Each refugee family lives in a single-room hut, with one outdoor toilet for every two families. The Nepalese government forbids them to work for fear it will create unemployment for local residents.

Life was even harder for them before 2006, when Nepal was a Hindu kingdom where conversions were a punishable offence.

"When I began preaching in 2000, I had to do it secretly," said Pastor Silwal of Morang district. "We could meet only surreptitiously in small groups. I used my hut as a makeshift church while many other groups were forced to rent out rooms outside the camp."

A fact-finding mission in 2004 by Brussels-based Human Rights Without Frontiers found that police pulled down a church structure built by Pentecostal Christians in the Beldangi



camp by orders of Nepal's home ministry. The rights group also reported that Hindu refugees ostracized the Christians, who had proceeded to rent a room outside the camp to meet three times a week for worship services and Bible study.

When the Jesus Loves Gospel Ministries (JLGM) organization sent officials from India to the Pathri camp in Morang in 2006, they found that local residents resentful of the refugees had taken note of a baptism service at a pond in a nearby jungle.

"In August, we were planning another baptism program," JLGM director Robert Singh reported. "But the villagers put deadly poisonous chemicals in the water ... Some of the young people went to take a bath ahead of our next baptism program. They found some fish floating on the water and, being very hungry – the refugees only get a very small ration, barely enough to survive on – they took some of the fish and ate them. Three of them died instantly."

Singh also stated that poisoned sweets were left on the premises of the refugee school in the camp. They were discovered in time to avert another tragedy.

Life for Christian refugees improved after Nepal saw a pro-democracy movement in 2006 that caused the army-backed government of Hindu king Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah to collapse. The king was forced to reinstate parliament, and lawmakers sought to curb his powers by declaring Nepal a secular state.

Though Christian refugees are now allowed to run churches openly in the camps, ill will toward them has yet to end. When Pastor Silwal asked camp authorities to allow him to open a church in 2006, Hindu neighbors protested, saying it would cause disturbances. Camp authorities allowed him to open a tiny church in a separate room on the condition that its activities would not disturb neighbors.

Earlier in his life in Bhutan, said the 40-year-old Pastor Silwal, he had been a stern Hindu who rebuked his two sisters mercilessly for becoming Christians. He forbade them to visit their church, which gathered in secret due to the ban on non-Buddhist religions in place at the time. They were also forbidden to bring the Bible inside their house in Geyleghug, a district in southern Bhutan close to the Indian border.

"I became a believer in 1988 after a near-death experience," Pastor Silwal told Compass. "I contracted malaria and was on the verge of death since no one could diagnose it. All the priests and shamans consulted by my Hindu family failed to cure me. One day, when I thought I was going to die I had a vision."

The pastor said he saw a white-robed figure holding a Bible in one hand and beckoning to him with the other. "Have faith in me," the figure told him. "I will cure you."

When he woke from his trance, Silwal asked his sisters to fetch him a copy of the Bible. They were alarmed at first, thinking he was going to beat them. But at his insistence, they nervously fetched the book from the thatched roof of the cow shed where they had kept it hidden. Pastor Silwal said he tried to read the Bible but was blinded by his fever and lost consciousness.

When he awoke, to his amazement and joy, the fever that had racked him for nearly five months was gone.

Pastor Silwal lost his home in 1990 to the ethnic and religious purge that forced him to flee along with thousands of others. It wasn't until 1998, he said, that he and his family formally converted to Christianity after seven years of grueling hardship in the refugee camp, where he saw "people dying like flies due to illness, lack of food and the cold."

“My little son too fell ill and I thought he would die,” Silwal said. “But he was cured; we decided to embrace Christianity formally.”

## **Homeless**

In 2001, Bhutan4Christ reported the number of Bhutanese Christians to be around 19,000, with the bulk of them – more than 10,500 – living in Nepal.

When persecution by the Bhutanese government began, frightened families raced towards towns in India across the border. Alarmed by the influx of Bhutanese refugees, Indian security forces packed them into trucks and dumped them in southern Nepal.

Later, when the homesick refugees tried to return home, Indian security forces blocked the way. There were several rounds of scuffles, resulting in police killing at least three refugees.

Simon Gazmer was seven when his family landed at the bank of the Mai river in Jhapa district in southeastern Nepal. Now 24, he still remembers the desolation that reigned in the barren land, where mists and chilly winds rose from the river, affecting the morale and health of the refugees. They lived in bamboo shacks with thin plastic sheets serving as roofs; they had little food or medicine.

“My uncle Padam Bahadur had tuberculosis, and we thought he would die,” said Gazmer, who lives in Beldangi II, the largest of seven refugee camps. “His recovery made us realize the grace of God, and our family became Christians.”

The plight of the refugees improved after the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) stepped in, receiving permission from the government of Nepal to run the refugee camps. According to the UNHCR, there were 111,631 registered refugees in seven camps run in the two districts of Jhapa and Morang.

Though Nepal held 15 rounds of bilateral talks with Bhutan for the repatriation of the refugees, the Buddhist government dragged its feet, eventually breaking off talks. Meantime, international donors assisting the refugee camps began to grow weary, resulting in the slashing of aid and food. Finally, seven western governments – Canada, Norway, Denmark, New Zealand, Australia, the United States and the Netherlands – persuaded Nepal to allow the refugees to resettle in third countries.

The exodus of the refugees started in 2007. Today, according to the UNHCR, more than 26,000 have left for other countries, mostly the United States. A substantial number of the nearly 85,000 people left in the camps are ready to follow suit.

Although they now have a new life to look forward to, many of Bhutan’s Christian refugees are saddened by the knowledge that their homeland still remains barred to them. So some are looking at the next best thing: a return to Nepal, now that it is secular, where they will feel more at home than in the West.

“I don’t have grand dreams,” said Pastor Silwal. “In Australia I want to enroll in a Bible college and become a qualified preacher. Then I want to return to Nepal to spread the word of God.”

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## **Why Bhutan’s royalists fear Christianity**

***Social, political factors behind country’s reluctance to allow Christianity to grow***

By Anugrah Kumar

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Given that the king embodies religious and political authority, the common people worship him.

Additionally, Buddhism is woven into the national fabric. Bhutan is the only country in the world that employs a "Gross National Happiness" (GNH) equation to measure its people's level of happiness, and the GNH assumes that all citizens are Buddhist. Respondents to the GNH survey are asked questions concerning "spiritual activities like meditation and prayers, and consideration of karmic effects in daily life."

The introduction of democracy in Bhutan did not involve disturbing the religious and cultural status quo. While former King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who served from 1972 to 2006, brought democracy to Bhutan without any demand for it, people believe his intentions were far from transforming the country into a full democracy.

It is believed that the political turmoil in neighboring Nepal partly influenced King Singye Wangchuck's decision to make the country, at least on paper, a constitutional monarchy after over 100 years of absolute monarchy. A decade-long civil war led by the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist – which took more than 12,000 lives – is believed to be behind the abolition of the royal parliamentary system and the adoption of a socialist republic in Nepal. In 2006 the then-king of Nepal, Gyanendra, agreed to relinquish sovereign power to the people.

All sources in Bhutan confirmed that the present king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck (selected in 2006 but not crowned until 2008), was still the supreme ruler. Perhaps this is why both the ruling Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (Bhutan Peace and Prosperity) Party and the opposition People's Democratic Party are royalists.

Pictures of kings of Bhutan are found everywhere in the country – in homes, shops, hotels, underground churches and on street walls. Many large posters with the kings' pictures carrying the inscription "Kings of our Hearts" can be seen along the streets. Even public buses have "Our Kings Forever" painted on them.

"But you cannot expect things to change overnight," said the former government official. "It's not wise to allow development without any bridle. Things are improving slowly.

Added an optimistic source, "Freedom in the real sense of the word and in all spheres is bound to come to Bhutan. It's just a matter of time."

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## **Despite democracy, Christians in Bhutan remain underground**

*Open practice of faith could lead to more persecution, they fear*

By Anugrah Kumar

Compass Direct (25.01.2010) / HRWF (26.01.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - In this distant and isolated nation in the eastern Himalayas, known as the "Land of the Thunder Dragon," almost everything looks uniformly Buddhist.

Most men and women in the landlocked country between India and China wear their national dress, and all the buildings – with their sloping walls, trefoil-shaped windows and pitched roofs – look alike, as if they were Buddhist monasteries.

There are no visible signs of Christians' tiny presence, but they do exist. Christians, whose only official identity falls in the "others" category in the census, are estimated to range in number between 3,000 and 6,000. And they live out their Christian lives underground – no church buildings, Christian cemeteries or Christian bookstores are yet allowed.

Of Bhutan's more than 670,000 people, 75 percent of them practice Buddhism, according to the 2005 census. Around 22 percent are Hindu, mostly of Nepali origin.

An absolute monarchy for over 100 years, Bhutan became a democratic, constitutional monarchy in March 2008, as per the wish of the former King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who served from 1972 to 2006. It has been nearly two years since democracy arrived in Druk Yul, as the country is known in its national language, Dzongkha. But little has changed for Christians.

If there is anything open about Christianity, it is the acknowledgement of Christians' presence in the national press, which was born after the advent of democracy.

"A journalist telephoned and asked me if I was converting local people," said a middle-aged pastor clad in Gho, the men's national uniform, a knee-length gown woven with colorful wool. "I wondered how she got my phone number. Maybe a Christian friend of mine passed it on."

The pastor requested anonymity – the same request that high government officials made, no matter how trivial the matters they divulged.

The pastor said he told the journalist he did not pay people to convert. "People choose to become Christians out of their own free will," he said. "I am working within the constitution of the country."

### **Still a monarchy**

Asked why the church remained underground in spite of a provision for religious freedom in the new constitution, the pastor replied, "Virtually, Bhutan is still a monarchy. The time is yet to come when we have the assurance of protection."

His wife, wearing the ankle-length woollen skirt or Kira that is the national dress for women, smiled at what was perhaps a naïve question – the power of the monarchy is beyond question. By law all Bhutanese citizens wear the national dress in schools and certain public, government and religious places. Non-compliance can result in fines or imprisonment.

Asked what would happen if authorities found out about their underground church, the pastor said that before 2008 they would have been arrested because Christianity was banned.

"Even now, there will be serious repercussions," he said. "What exactly will happen, I do not know. But no Christian worker will take the risk to find it out the hard way."

To construct any building, Bhutanese citizens require a licence from the government.

"As far as the governance is concerned, the Royal Government of Bhutan is very caring," he said. "We get free education and free medicine and hospitalization, and there is a sense of security because the crime rate is very low. But asking for a licence for a church is beyond our imagination as of now."

The present king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck (selected in 2006 but not crowned until 2008) rules absolutely, said local Buddhists, though not with any regret.

"It's democracy, but still not a democracy," said a civil government employee requesting anonymity. "It's the king who makes all important decisions."

Asked about the Christian presence, he said Christianity grew even at a time when it was banned. "There are many secret Christians. They meet in secret locations for prayer."

The clean-shaven, medium-built 31-year-old king, an avid soccer fan who studied at Phillips Academy and Wheaton College in Massachusetts in the United States and the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom, is seen as a progressive person but conservative in matters of religion and culture.

According to the new constitution, the king is the head of state, though the parliament has the power to impeach him by a two-thirds majority vote – a provision not likely to be used anytime in the future, according to popular sentiment.

### **Banned**

Suggesting that Christian fears are warranted, a pastor from Pheuntsholing town near the India border explained that memories of a period of severe crackdown on underground churches were still fresh in the minds of local Christians.

"I was picked up from a house where I was conducting Sunday worship in Tsirang district in September 1995 and put in a prison," said the pastor. "I was asked to leave the district with immediate effect, and I had to move to another location."

His voice trembling as he spoke by telephone, he said, "Once the government discovers that you are a Christian, nothing will be free for you."

The pastor said that although there are no violent attacks on Christians, they do face discrimination by the government and society.

According to the government-run weekly Kuensel of Nov. 4, 1992, the National Assembly banned Christianity in 1969 and in 1979. The edicts against Christians were said to have passed due to reports of conversions to Christianity in south Bhutan, inhabited mostly by people of Nepali origin.

In the early 1990s the government of Bhutan began a massive crackdown on Christians, mainly in southern parts, and intensified it towards the end of the decade.

The authorities identified Christians in government or business and took their signatures on a form pledging compliance with rules and regulations governing practice of religion. There were several reports, though unconfirmed, of violence against Christians by police and village heads during the period.

In April 2001, international media reported on persecution of Christians in Bhutan when police stormed churches on Palm Sunday to register Christians, many of who were detained and threatened.

Almost a decade later, the legal standing of the Christian minority under the new constitution remains unclear.

### **Ambiguous laws**

In May 2009, the national daily Bhutan Times quoted Interior Minister Lyonpo Minjur Dorji as saying, "It was absolutely okay if people were born Christian ... The constitution supports them. But it is unlawful to convert. If we get proof of proselytization in the country, we shall definitely take action."

The newspaper noted that there are no official churches in Bhutan. "And most of the Sunday masses and gatherings are held in the homes of pastors and converts," noted the daily, which occasionally criticizes government policies, though mildly and without taking aim at any particular official.

The new Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, drafted in 2005 and officially adopted in 2008, gives religious freedom to all the citizens of the country but also contains a virtual "anti-conversion law" as found in neighboring India.

The exotic, official website of the constitution – which displays the national emblem of two dragons and a lotus surmounted by a jewel symbolizing harmony between secular and religious powers and sovereignty of the nation – states that all Bhutanese citizens "shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion" in Article 7.

But Article 7 adds: "No person shall be compelled to belong to another faith by means of coercion or inducement."

What the terms "coercion" and "inducement" mean is not clear. Whether "proselytization," which the home minister recently suggested was illegal, means



propagation of Christianity or conversion by "coercion or inducement," is also left unclear.

The Supreme Court of Bhutan, whose judge appointments have yet to be completed and are not yet functional, is likely to have the prerogative to interpret the constitution.

What is unambiguous, however, is that the government of Bhutan will continue to preserve the uniform culture of the country, which, it maintains, is based on Buddhist values. Article 3 of the constitution says that "Buddhism is the spiritual heritage of Bhutan, which promotes among others the principles and values of peace, non-violence, compassion and tolerance," and "it is the responsibility of religious institutions and personalities to promote the spiritual heritage of the country while also ensuring that religion remains separate from politics in Bhutan."

Article 4 mandates the government to "endeavour to preserve, protect and promote the cultural heritage of the country," adding that "parliament may enact such legislation as may be necessary to advance the cause of the cultural enrichment of Bhutanese society."

According to Article 8, it is a fundamental duty of all citizens to "preserve, protect and respect the culture and heritage of the nation."

"Apart from religious restrictions, we are happy to be in Bhutan," said a pastor from Thimphu. "Look at the unrest India, China and Nepal have from time to time. We are happy and thankful to God for this nation."

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