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Two Pastors in Bhutan jailed without charges

Interior minister cites 'proselytizing,' but police find no evidence.

Morning Star News (10.04.2014) – Two pastors in southern Bhutan have spent more than a month in jail without being formally charged.

Police arrested M.B. Thapa (aka Lobzang) and Tandin Wangyal in Khapdani village in Samtse District on March 5. Minister of Home and Cultural Affairs Damcho Dorji said at a recent press conference that the two pastors were trying to coercively “proselytize” and had not obtained permission to hold a public gathering, though area Police Officer in Charge Pema Wangdi reportedly ruled out a proselytizing charge.

Wangdi told *Business Bhutan* that police had eliminated the possibility of charges of coercive proselytizing after questioning the two pastors and 30 Christians.

“We found no evidences to show they were [forcibly] converting,” Wangdi said, adding that the only basis for their arrest was alleged failure to procure prior approval to conduct a gathering in the village.

The two pastors, who are still awaiting formal charges from the Office of the Attorney General, spoke at a March 4 ground-breaking ceremony for construction of a new house at the invitation of another Christian. The next day they were arrested.

“The constitution gives the freedom to practice your own religion but bars anybody from forcefully converting others,” Minister Dorji said at the press conference. “On the other hand, they had not obtained permission from local authorities. This is a crime under the penal code amendment, so if you have violated this provision, it does not matter whether you are Buddhist, Hindu or Christian, then the law will take its own course.”

The family of Pastor Wangyal has appealed to the office of Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay to ensure that the case is not delayed any longer, members said.

“We don’t have a clue why they are taking too long,” the pastor’s wife, a mother of three, told Morning Star News.

Sources told Morning Star News that the attorney general’s office is still investigating the case.

“I don’t know why the investigation is taking so long when police OC [Wangdi] personally told me they had done the investigation and submitted the report,” a relative of Pastor Thapa said. “Why is the OAG taking so much time to file a charge sheet?”

Bhutan, a Bhuddist-majority nation of over 700,000 people, transitioned to a constitutional democratic monarchy after a century of absolute monarchy in 2008. Its constitution provides for religious freedom, with Section 4, Article 7 stating that citizens shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. It adds that no person “shall be compelled to belong to another faith by means of coercion or inducement.”

The country's estimated 19,000 Christians are not legally recognized, while only Buddhists and Hindus can register their associations to become legal entities. Christians, therefore, confine themselves to closed-door house churches.

Christianity is generally seen as a Western faith, and those who convert to Christianity are viewed with suspicion. Officials at times show hostility towards Christians. On July 31, 2012, a sub-divisional officer, Pema Wangda, in Gelephu town in southern Bhutan, reportedly beat pastor Pema Sherpa. The officer reportedly threatened to kill the pastor after he refused to temporarily halt his church's worship services.

Bhutan seeks to preserve and promote the state-endorsed religion of Mahayana Buddhism and its distinct culture through its policy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), which measures the nation's progress in terms of the well-being of its people and has earned Bhutan a global reputation.

While Christians wonder if GNH is inclusive of minorities, a relative of one of the jailed pastors remained hopeful.

"We have faith in the justice system of our country, and we will approach the highest authorities if they are not released sooner," the relative told Morning Star News.
