

NEPAL 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The interim constitution establishes Nepal as a secular state and provides for every person's right to profess and practice his or her own religion. The law prohibits proselytizing; however, the government has not prosecuted anyone for this offense, and individuals were free to change religion. Although there were no registration requirements for religious groups, unregistered groups could not seek government funding for religious schools or own land. Tibetan Buddhists were generally allowed to hold small religious and cultural celebrations.

The only significant report of communal/religious violence occurred in February, when conflict over a Hindu procession through a Muslim area in the Rautahat district led to property damage. Discrimination against members of lower castes, particularly Dalits, remained widespread and inhibited their access to Hindu temples and ability to participate in religious events. One bystander was killed during a confrontation over charges of violating the prohibition on cow slaughter.

U.S. embassy representatives discussed concerns regarding the protection of religious minorities, caste discrimination, freedom of assembly for religious and cultural groups, and the ban on proselytization with the government. Officers engaged with religious leaders, students, and other members of the public on religious diversity and tolerance in Kathmandu and throughout the country. Embassy-provided assistance for preservation and restoration facilitated improved access to major religious sites. An embassy micro-scholarship program for underprivileged youth, including Muslims, promoted religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 31 million (July 2014 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, especially Muslims and Christians, report their numbers are significantly undercounted. Some Muslim groups state there are nearly four million Muslims, more than triple the figure in the census. Christian groups state their numbers increased significantly over the past several years, with some stating Christians comprise at least 7 percent of the population, or approximately two

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million individuals. Many individuals adhere to a syncretic faith encompassing elements of Hinduism, Buddhism, and traditional folk practices.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The interim constitution declares the country to be a secular state, and provides for every person's right to profess, practice, and protect his or her own religion. The interim constitution states "no person shall be entitled to convert another person from one religion to another;" however, the ban on proselytizing was not enforced.

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

The law prohibits the killing, attempted killing, and instigation of killing cows. Penalties for violating this law are 12 years in prison for killing, and six years for both attempted killing and instigation.

The law does not require religious institutions to register, but in order to receive limited government funding and teacher training, religious schools must officially register with local district education offices (part of the Ministry of Education) and supply information about their funding sources. In addition, under the law, all religious groups, including congregations, have to register with the government as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in order to own land as an institution, an important practical step for establishing houses of worship or burial sites.

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

Government Practices

On August 14, police in the Gorkha district responded to a complaint of cow slaughter carried out by the Buddhist Tamang community, which does not subscribe to the Hindu religious prohibition on killing cows. When police officers attempted to arrest the accused, a violent confrontation with local residents occurred, leading to the death of one bystander.

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As the administrative process for registration was cumbersome and onerous, purchasing land in the name of religious entities remained difficult. In practice, congregations representing each religious group, whether registered or not, operated freely and without obstruction by having individual congregation members purchase land under their own names on the institution's behalf.

Government authorities permitted the resident Tibetan community to celebrate Buddhist holidays and conduct other ceremonies with cultural/religious significance without obstruction, such as a small ceremony to mark the birthday of the 11th Panchen Lama, an event commemorating the Dalai Lama's receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize, and a ceremony to commemorate the Dalai Lama's birthday.

The government-funded Pashupati Area Development Trust maintained restrictions preventing Christian burials in a common cemetery behind the Pashupati Hindu Temple in Kathmandu. It did allow burials of individuals from non-Hindu indigenous faiths, several of which took place during the year. Some Christians reportedly traveled 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 received public land from the government for that purpose. Some Christians indicated they often faced opposition to starting new cemeteries. Under pressure from the dominant local Hindu community, one Christian congregation sold land it had bought with the intention of establishing a cemetery.

The government continued to permit religious groups to establish and operate their own schools. According to the Department of Education, the executive office within the Ministry of Education, approximately 1,306 madrassahs were registered with district education offices, an increase of 113 during the year; however, some Muslim groups stated there are at least 3,500 madrassahs. The government funded the salary of one teacher for each registered religious school. The Department of Education prepared curricula for the registered schools. Muslims were able to freely participate in the Hajj.

There were no foreign missionaries who declared to the government an intent to publicly proselytize; however, dozens of Christian missionary hospitals, welfare organizations, and schools have operated for decades. There were no reports by the media or the government that these organizations engaged in proselytizing, and they operated without government interference. The government did not expel any foreign workers for proselytizing, but missionaries reported they attempted to keep

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their activities discreet. Many foreign Christian organizations had direct ties to local churches and sponsored clergy for religious training abroad.

Although religious education was not part of the curriculum in public schools, some public schools had a statue of Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of learning, on their grounds.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On February 7, clashes occurred between Hindus and Muslims in the Rautahat district in the southern part of the country, leading to some minor injuries and the damage or destruction of 48 houses and other personal property belonging to members of the Muslim community. The clashes were triggered by the reported refusal of Muslims to allow Hindus to conduct a ritual procession in a predominantly Muslim area (in previous years, Hindu devotees followed a different route for the procession). After the incident, the local district administration mediated between leaders of the two communities and arranged for compensation for those whose homes were damaged or destroyed. There were no other incidents reported during the year.

Leaders of religious minorities indicated that most of those who chose to convert to other religions, including Hindus who converted to Islam or Christianity, were willing and able 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. According to media reports and NGOs, Hindu priests and local high-caste residents often prevented Dalits from entering temples, performing religious rites, and participating in cultural and religious festivals.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officers urged government and political party officials involved in drafting a permanent constitution to preserve existing religious freedom protections and to end the legal prohibition against proselytizing. Officers maintained contact with Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, and other religious groups to engage on religious freedom issues throughout the year.

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Embassy officers interacted with students and other members of the public on topics including religious diversity and tolerance, as part of programs commemorating the U.S. civil rights movement. The embassy provided assistance to improve access to three religious sites through preservation and restoration work. Participants in an embassy-sponsored exchange program received exposure to religious diversity in the United States. A program for underprivileged youth, including Muslims, promoted religious tolerance in its curriculum.