



## Religion

## Population

## Area

- Buddhists : **83.2%**
- Hindus : **11.3%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **3.3%**
- Christians : **1.9%**
- Others : **0.3%**

784,000

38,364 Km<sup>2</sup>

## Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

In terms of religious freedom, things have not really changed in the past two years. In this country, where Vajrayana Buddhism (a variant of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism) is the state religion, one of the main issues is the place of Buddhism and its large clergy (about 3,500 monks out of a population of 784,000). The 2008 constitution illustrates the contradictions between a desire to modernise the country and concerns about foreign influence. Thus, among the many paradoxes of the Bhutanese constitution, the most important one is that, while based on Buddhist culture and religion and declaring itself “bound to defend this heritage”, the constitution also lays down the bases for the separation of religion and state. In so doing, it breaks with centuries of civilian and religious government. During the elections, the Electoral Commission upheld this idea (“religions must be above the political debate” and monks do not have the right to vote), but it is by no means shared by all the Buddhist clergy. Among the latter, many are convinced that the secular foundations of Bhutan's constitution are in contradiction with the predominant influence they believe Buddhism should exert on the country and the state.<sup>[1]</sup>

In practice, although religious freedom is enshrined in the constitution, any proselytising “by a foreign religion” is forbidden in the country. Non-Buddhist religious personnel are not allowed into the country, and non-Buddhist religions must be practised privately. In the case of Christianity, viewed as “the vanguard of the West”, there is great mistrust. Christians are perceived as a threat to “Bhutanese national identity”, which is seen as one and the same with Buddhism. Although Christians number only a few thousand (including a few hundred Catholics), there is a ban on proselytising, handing out Bibles and building churches, schools or other Christian institutions.

The prohibitions against non-Buddhists are directly linked to a desire to preserve “the nation’s heritage”. For example, local Buddhists consider mountains as sacred land, and the government forbids Christians from burying their dead there.

Anyone who flouts this ban risks having their graves desecrated – a situation that has been the cause of frequent strife.

## Incidents

The desire to protect the nation's heritage is not only aimed at minority religions. It also appears to be behind a ban in January 2017 against screening a film in the country. The movie in question, "Hema Hema: Sing Me a Song While I Wait", was directed by Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche. A citizen of Bhutan, this Tibetan Buddhist lama was criticised for showing masked characters. According to the Department of Culture of the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs, the use of religious masks "is not in keeping with our own tradition and culture"<sup>[2]</sup> For some, the ban stems from a desire not to allow the nation's heritage and cultural traditions to be destabilised by excessively rapid cultural and economic development.

At another level, the crisis that began in the 1990s with the mass expulsion of the Lhot-shampas, an ethnic group of Nepali origin practising Hinduism and living in the south of the country, has still not yet ended<sup>[3]</sup> The Lhotshampas – descendants of Nepali Hindus who settled in the kingdom of Bhutan in the early twentieth century – paid a price in the 1990s for the government's policy of "Bhutanisation". More than 100,000 of them became stateless after they were expelled, ending up in refugee camps in Nepal, where they stayed until 2007 when the United Nations began resettling them in third countries. The refusal to consider this community as part of the nation has led some observers to view the democracy established in Bhutan as a "conditional democracy" from which some groups are excluded on the basis of ethnicity or religion.

## Prospects for freedom of religion

For some time, the United Nations and a number of economists have argued that the Gross National Product (GNP) is not a measure that accurately and fairly reflects the wealth of a nation, especially in terms of social progress. Instead, they stress the need to measure a nation's "global happiness". This notion echoes the widely publicised measure of Gross National Happiness (GNH) adopted by the Bhutanese government. However, in this small landlocked Himalayan country, the GNH does not seem to be fully realised: in 2017, the United Nations "World Happiness Report" ranked Bhutan 97th out of 155 countries evaluated.<sup>[4]</sup>

The relatively poor result for Bhutan, a country of just under 800,000 inhabitants, on the international scale of "happiness" does not prevent it from becoming familiar with some form of political modernity. The Bhutanese government seems to be driven by a desire to develop the country's economy in order to create jobs for its large youth population (the overall median age is 28), while protecting society from opening up and developing too fast. With respect to religion, this attitude is reflected in a very cautious approach to opening up. With the adoption of a law on religious organisations in 2007, a special agency was set up, the Chhoedey Lhentshog (Commission for Religious Organisations), to deal with faith-based groups. In all, 94 organisations have been officially recognised, but all of them are Buddhist and Hindu. The Hindu minority is represented by the Hindu Dharma Samudaya of Bhutan (the Hindu religious community of Bhutan). In the case of Christians, even though the country's authorities say they have no objection to them living their faith in Bhutan, they have also made it clear that they do not welcome conversions. Thus, the small local Christian communities have adapted to the circumstances and have refrained from demanding official recognition for their institutions.

## Endnotes / Sources

[1] Bhoutan, Observatoire de la liberté religieuse, <http://www.liberte-religieuse.org/bhoutan>, (accessed 30th January 2018).

[2] Rezwan, 'Bhutan's Authorities Ban Film for 'Misusing' Religious Masks on Screen', Global Voices, 19 th January 2017, <https://globalvoices.org/2017/01/19/bhutans-authorities-ban-film-for-misusing-religious-masks-on-screen/>, (accessed 16th

February 2018).

[3] Maximillian Mørch, 'Bhutan's Dark Secret: The Lhotshampa Expulsion', The Diplomat, 21st September 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/09/bhutans-dark-secret-the-lhotshampa-expulsion/>, (accessed 16th February 2018).

[4] 'Bhutan is not happy – Happiness Report 2017', Bhutan News Network, 22st March 2017, <http://www.bhutannewsnetwork.com/2017/03/bhutan-is-not-happy-happiness-report-2017/>, (accessed 16th February 2018).