



Mongolia

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, the law limits proselytizing, and some religious groups face bureaucratic harassment or are denied registration.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 604,247 square miles, and its population is approximately 2.75 million. Buddhism and the country's traditions are tied closely, and almost all ethnic Mongolians (93 percent of the population) practice some form of Buddhism. Lamaist Buddhism of the Tibetan variety is the traditional and dominant religion.

Since the end of socialist controls on religion and the country's traditions in 1990, active interest in Buddhism and its practice have grown. The Buddhist community is not homogeneous, and there are several competing schools, including a small group that believes that the sutras (books containing religious teachings) should be in the Mongolian language and that all members of the religious clergy should be citizens.

Kazakhs, most of whom are Muslim, are the largest ethnic minority, constituting approximately 4 percent of the population nationwide and 85 percent in the western province, Bayan-Olgij. Kazakhs operate Islamic schools for their children. They sometimes receive financial assistance from religious organizations in Kazakhstan and Turkey.

There is a small number of Christians, including Roman Catholics, Russian Orthodox, and members of some Protestant denominations. There are no nationwide statistics on the exact number of Christians. The number of citizens who practice Christianity in the capital, Ulaanbaatar, is approximately 24,000, or 3 percent of the registered population of the city.

Some citizens practice shamanism, but there are no reliable statistics on their numbers.

Foreign missionary groups include Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, various evangelical Protestant groups, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and adherents of the Baha'i Faith.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, the law limits proselytizing, and some religious groups that seek to register face bureaucratic harassment. The Constitution explicitly recognizes the separation of church and state.

Although there is no state religion, traditionalists believe that Buddhism is the "natural religion" of the country. The Government has contributed to the restoration of several Buddhist sites that are important religious, historical, and cultural centers. The Government otherwise does not subsidize the Buddhist religion.

Religious groups must register with the Ministry of Justice and Home Affairs. Groups must provide the following documentation when registering: a letter from the city council or other local authority granting approval to conduct religious services, a letter to the Ministry requesting that the group be registered, a brief description of the organization, the charter of the organization, documentation of the founding of the local group, a list of leaders or officers, brief biographic information on the person who will conduct religious services, and the number of worshippers. The Ulaanbaatar City Council requires similar documentation prior to granting approval to conduct religious services. While the Ministry is responsible for registrations, local assemblies have the authority to approve or deny applications at the local level.

Under the law, the Government may supervise and limit the number of places of worship and clergy for organized religions; however, there were no reports of this occurring during the period covered by this report. The registration process is decentralized with several layers of bureaucracy. Registration in the capital may not be sufficient if a group intends to work in the countryside where local registration also is necessary. Some groups encountered harassment during the registration process, including demands by midlevel city officials for financial contributions in return for securing legal status. When registration was completed, the same authorities threatened some religious groups with withdrawal of approval. In general, it appears that difficulties in registering primarily are the consequence of bureaucratic action by local officials and attempts to extort financial assistance for projects not funded by the city. There are 328 registered places of worship in the country, including 191 Buddhist, 127 Christian, 5 Baha'i, and 5 Muslim. During the period covered by this report, 14 new Christian churches were registered in Ulaanbaatar. Some of these organizations had been active and pursuing registration since 1994.

Contacts with coreligionists outside the country are allowed. Legal restrictions on such contacts were abolished in 1993, and human rights sources state that there are no de facto efforts to restrict normal contacts and interchange.

Religious instruction is not permitted in public schools. There is a school to train Buddhist lamas in Ulaanbaatar.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

While the law does not prohibit proselytizing by registered religious groups, it limits such activity by forbidding the use of incentives, pressure, or deceptive methods to introduce religion. A Ministry of Education directive bans mixing foreign language or other training with religious teaching or instruction. Monitoring of the ban, particularly in the capital area, is strict. However, there were no reported violations of the ban in recent years. Religious groups that violate the law may not receive an extension of their registration. If individuals violate the law, the Government may ask their employers to terminate their employment.

Some Christian missionary groups were still in the process of registering with the Ministry of Justice and Home Affairs during the period covered by this report. The process is protracted for some groups, but others are registered quickly. During the period covered by this report, 27 new Christian congregations sought to register in Ulaanbaatar, 13 of which were denied registration. City authorities asserted that they withheld registration because in some cases these churches operated illegally prior to seeking registration, by failing to report and pay tax obligations. According to a non-governmental organization (NGO) report, officials stated that the 60 Christian churches registered in Ulaanbaatar were sufficient.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Citizens generally are tolerant of the beliefs of others, and there were no reports of religiously motivated violence; however, because in the past humanitarian assistance was accompanied by proselytizing activity, there has been some friction between Christian missionary groups and citizens. Some conservatives have criticized foreign influences on youth and children, including foreign religions and the use of incentives to attract believers.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. Embassy officials have discussed with authorities specific registration difficulties encountered by Christian groups. These discussions focused attention on U.S. concern for religious freedom and opposition to corruption; the discussions resulted in a clarification of the requirements for registration. Embassy officials also continued to discuss registration requirements with faith-based NGOs.

The U.S. Embassy maintains regular contact with Buddhist leaders, as well as with leaders and clergy of Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, and Mormon religious groups. In addition, the Embassy has met with representatives of U.S.-based religious and humanitarian organizations. The Embassy maintains contact with the local office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights and the U.N. Development Program to discuss religious freedom and other human rights issues.

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