

WWL 2018

Keys to understanding Bhutan

Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12480707>

Recent country history

Bhutan was a kingdom with little contact with the outside world until the 1970s. In March 2008 it became a two-party parliamentary democracy after elections. Bhutan sees the necessity to open up, for example in developing a legal system which is more complex than the traditional way of balancing interests. This is why the country set up a new law school with the help of a US university in October 2016. This step helps the country to make different thinking and values welcome, but it could also lead to a renewed emphasis on the country's traditions and values. In a time when traditions seem to be sidelined (or at least challenged) by outward influences and the country is "Westernizing", there may be efforts limiting additional Western influence. As Bhutanese life is closely connected with the Buddhist religion and culture, anyone not adhering to Buddhism is watched with suspicion. This does not mean that such people are expelled from their homes or lose access to community resources, but they become social pariah.

The country's religious landscape

Bhutan has always been a Buddhist kingdom and is one of the last place where Vajrayana Buddhism is still practiced, although its ties with neighboring India have always been strong. According to the constitution, Buddhism is not only the cultural, but even the spiritual heritage of the country. Although there is usually no official pressure to participate in Buddhist festivals or live according to traditional customs, people are expected to do so. This means that all deviants are met with suspicion, for example Christians. Since the country's identity is tied with its cultural heritage, which is Buddhism, this causes the state to adopt a stringent approach towards non-Buddhist elements in Bhutanese society and a stronger effort to assert the dominance of Buddhism in the country.

Christians living in the south mainly come from Nepali ethnicity, many of them are living among the people who poured into Bhutan in the early 20th century. In the 1990s, more than 100,000 refugees fled Bhutan for Nepal. There are efforts to make repatriation agreements, but the situation remains tense. All this may be contributing to the government's hesitation to officially recognize Christians as a legal entity in Bhutan, despite promises being made to legalize their status in due course.

The country's political landscape

Bhutan is one of the very few examples where a governance change was implemented top-down and not bottom-up, with the king creating a constitutional monarchy in 1998. A constitution was not

enacted until 2008, when Bhutanese citizens elected a parliament and the new king was inaugurated at age 28. The king possesses ultimate authority and has the power to veto decisions, although he does not use this power publicly. He is regarded as the guardian of Buddhism and although he is young and very popular in society, he will not alter the role Buddhism plays in society. Minorities are able to vote and stand for elections, but the voice of religious minorities in particular is not strongly heard in society or government. That civil and political rights still have a long way to go was shown in August 2016, when a journalist was [charged with defamation](#) as he dared to challenge the country's nobility and called the independence of Bhutan's judiciary into question.

The country's socio-economic landscape

Bhutan is rich in resources and exports electricity to India, which contributes greatly to the state's income. Additionally, it relies heavily on tourism and particularly Indian tourists are increasingly visiting the country. While tourism is a way of "rubbing shoulders" with foreign cultures and of opening up, its importance is much more an economic factor: International tourists are obliged to spend a certain amount of money daily thus greatly contributing to the country's levels of hard currency. However, tourism always influences a country's traditions, a process Bhutan would prefer to avoid.

Christians seeking employment face problems as they are a minority; they are victims of discrimination and are short of alternatives. They often have to live in difficult economic and social circumstances.

Concluding remarks

Bhutan fears that greater civil freedoms might result in divisions and unrest within the country due to its geo-strategic vulnerability, which could be exploited by foreign forces. There is a notable drop in enrolments to monastic institutions which might indicate that Buddhism is losing its significance. This would be a severe threat to the country's culture and tradition. Such a trend could have both positive and negative effects on religious freedom in the country. On the negative side: If this trend continues, the state might take measures to re-assert the dominance of cultural and traditional norms to safeguard the Buddhist heritage of the country. Such a reaction would adversely affect any efforts by Christians in the country seeking official recognition. On the positive side: This could indicate that Buddhism is losing significance in Bhutanese society which might eventually lead to both state and society adopting a more tolerant approach towards other religious groups in the country.

Word count: 841