

Continued Ban on Converting Others Proposed in Nepal

A legislative panel in Nepal has proposed retaining a ban on converting others in the country's new constitution.

Parliament has yet to decide on the proposal, but Christian leaders said they fear it is likely to be approved given that Nepal's largest political party, led by former Maoist rebels, sympathizes with the deposed king's wishes for such a ban. The country is forging a new constitution as part of its transition from a Hindu monarchy to a democracy.

Bishop Narayan Sharma of the Believers Church said he expects approval of the ban as recommended by the Committee on Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles (CFRDP). A Sept. 13 report by the Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance said a preliminary draft the CFRDP presented to Nepal's Parliament penalizes activities aimed at encouraging others to convert, though it does not punish individuals for converting.

The CFRDP chairperson, Binda Pandey, told Compass her panel's proposal was final.

"We have submitted the draft to the Constituent Assembly, and no more drafts will be presented," she said. "Now the Assembly has to make a decision."

Asked if the proposal violated international conventions such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Nepal is a signatory, Pandey said the committee looked at "all relevant conventions" as well as "Nepal's own unique socio-political context" before reaching the consensus.

Pandey is from the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist).

Bishop Anthony Sharma, the first ethnic Nepalese to be ordained as a Jesuit priest, said the panel's proposal will not alter his congregation's Christian activities.

"We do not have any fear, and we will continue to do what we are doing, whether it's a Hindu constitution or a secular one," he said. "Conversion is by God; people simply respond to Him. Our philosophy is, 'We propose and not impose.' The growth of the church in Nepal is due to the Christian witness, and not just by preaching."

The Rev. Dr. Mangalam Mahajan, president of Koinonia Church Fellowship, said he was hopeful that the new constitution would carry the same provisions as in the Indian Constitution, which allows for free profession, practice and propagation of religion – though some Indian states have "anti-conversion" laws outlawing forced or fraudulent conversion.

"The restriction will affect the Christian work in Nepal," Mahajan said.

Though the ban on encouraging conversions has been in force for more than five decades, it is unclear how it would be interpreted and implemented in the new constitution. Christians fear that Hindu nationalist groups would misuse the ban to restrict public meetings and social work that could be suspected of being aimed at conversions.

Proselytizing was outlawed in the Himalayan nation in its 1959 Constitution, which replaced the country's first interim constitution of 1951. Since then, all consecutive constitutions have retained the ban, including the 2007 interim constitution issued a year after the abolition of the world's only Hindu monarchy.

The bishop of the Believers Church, Narayan Sharma, said he was not surprised at the proposed continuation of the ban.

"We know that the new constitution will restrict conversions

to 'protect' the country's demography and thereby its culture," Sharma said. "But Nepalese Christians live as per the country's culture. I myself never wear a tie, which is seen as Western."

He added that the only upside of such a ban would be that restrictions could filter out conversions that are less than genuine.

"Only those who are willing to pay the price will remain," Sharma said. "It is surprising, though, that socially Nepal is very progressive—homosexual marriages are legal—but when it comes to religion, it becomes conservative."

Churches in Nepal had formed a Christian Constitution Recommendation Committee which sent its proposals – almost identical to religious freedom provisions in the Indian Constitution – to the Assembly two years ago.

Royalist Threat

Although Maoists were at the forefront of the movement to overthrow the Hindu monarchy in Nepal, they now reportedly sympathize with deposed King Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev.

It is widely believed in Nepal that India—which is trying to counter Chinese influence—was behind the abolition of the monarchy as well as the fall of Prachanda's government. Both fell after they sought to increase Nepal's engagement with China.

On Aug. 26, Kamal Thapa, president of the royalist National Royalist Party-Nepal, claimed that Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal, known as Prachanda, was "positive about reinstating monarchy," reported The Times of India.

Prachanda is the chairman of the United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist).

“Prachanda told me during a meeting that foreign intervention has intensified in the country after the abolition of monarchy,” the daily quoted Thapa as saying.

Telegraph Nepal daily quoted Thapa as accusing the Unified Marxist Leninist and the Nepali Congress parties of “being controlled by foreigners.” At a party meeting on Sept. 3, Thapa added that the Maoists had raised the demand for restoration of a “cultural monarchy,” with the king safeguarding a single culture.

“Even during the peoples’ revolt, the Maoists were in favor of preserving monarchy in one form or the other,” he claimed.

Christians fear that the sense of power that the royalists have attained in their camaraderie with the Maoists could embolden Hindu nationalist groups – though such groups are not known to be linked to pro-monarchy politicians.

Nepal, which shares its borders with India and China, was a Hindu kingdom for almost 240 years until 2006, when a decade-long civil war by the Maoists culminated in a fierce seven-week protest that resulted in the overthrow of the monarchy. In 2008, Constituent Assembly elections were held in which the Maoists won a majority and formed a coalition government with Prachanda as prime minister.

The Assembly was tasked to promulgate the new constitution by last May 28. Prachanda, however, resigned in May 2009 after his attempt to sack the army chief was opposed by the president, who is from the Nepali Congress, seen as pro-India.

Madhav Kumar Nepal, leader of the Unified Marxist Leninist party, was made the new prime minister. But he, too, resigned last June under pressure by Maoists, who had otherwise refused to extend the term of the Assembly. Kumar Nepal continues to be the caretaker prime minister of Nepal as the parliament has not been able to elect a new leader.

The Assembly had failed to promulgate a new constitution by the May 2010 deadline due to political instability and divisions. The deadline for the promulgation of the new constitution stands at May 28, 2011.

According to the 2001 Census, more than 80 percent of the nearly 30 million people in Nepal are Hindu. Christians are less than 1 percent.