

Christian in Bhutan Imprisoned for Showing Film on Christ

A court in predominantly Buddhist Bhutan has sentenced a Christian to three years in prison for “attempting to promote civil unrest” by screening films on Christianity.

A local court in Gelephu convicted Prem Singh Gurung, a 40-year-old ethnic Nepalese citizen from Sarpang district in south Bhutan, on Oct. 6, according to the government-run daily *Kuense*¹.

Gurung was arrested four months ago after local residents complained that he was showing Christian films in Gonggaon and Simkharkha villages in Jigmecholing block. Gurung invited villagers to watch Nepali movies, and between each feature he showed films on Christianity.

Government attorneys could not prove “beyond reasonable doubt” that Gurung promoted civil unrest, and therefore “he was charged with an attempt to promote civil unrest,” the daily reported.

Gurung was also charged with violation of the Bhutan Information, Communication and Media Act of 2006. Sections 105(1) and 110 of this law require that authorities examine all films before public screening.

A Christian from Bhutan’s capital, Thimphu, told Compass that the conviction of Gurung disturbed area villagers.

While Gurung has the right to appeal, it remained unclear if he had the resources to take that course.

Both Gonggaon and Simkharkha are virtually inaccessible. It can take up to 24 and 48 hours to reach the villages from the

nearest road.

“Both villages do not have electricity,” the daily reported. “But Prem Singh Gurung, with the help of some people, is believed to have carried a projector and a generator to screen the movies in the village.”

Over 75 percent of the 683,407 people in Bhutan are Buddhist, mainly from western and eastern parts. Hindus, mostly ethnic Nepalese from southern Bhutan, are estimated to be around 22 percent of the population.

It is also estimated that around 6,000 Bhutanese, mostly from south, are Christian in this landlocked nation between India and China. However, their presence is not officially acknowledged in the country. As a result, they practice their faith from the confines of their homes, with no Christian institution officially registered.

Buddhism is the state religion in Bhutan, and the government is mandated to protect its culture and religion according to the 2008 constitution. As in other parts of South Asia, people in Bhutan mistakenly believe that Christianity is a Western faith and that missionaries give monetary benefits to convert people from other religions.

Yesterday’s Kuensel published an opinion piece by a Bhutanese woman from New York who described herself as “an aspiring Buddhist” condemning both the conviction of Gurung and Christian “tactics.”

“Although we may not like the tactics used by the Christians to proselytize or ‘sell’ their religion to impoverished and vulnerable groups, let’s not lose sight of the bigger picture, in terms of religious tolerance, and what constitutes ‘promoting civil unrest,’” wrote Sonam Ongmo.

“If we truly want to establish ourselves as a well-functioning democracy, with equal rights for all, let’s start with one of

the fundamental ones – the right to choose one's faith. We have nothing to worry about Buddhism losing ground to Christianity, but we will if, as a predominantly Buddhist state, we start to deny people the right to their faith."

While her view is representative of liberal Buddhists in Bhutan, a reader's response in a forum on *Kuensel's* website reflected the harder line.

"These Christians are a cancer to our society," wrote a reader identifying himself as The Last Dragon. "They had crusades after crusades, we don't need that. We are very happy with Buddhism. Once Christianity is perfect, as they always claim [it] to be, then let's see."

In July, the government of Bhutan proposed an amendment in the Penal Code of Bhutan which would punish "proselytizing" that "uses coercion or other forms of inducement."

Christian persecution arose in Bhutan in the 1980s, when the king began a "one-nation, one-people" campaign to "protect the country's sovereignty and cultural integrity." Ethnic Nepalese, however, protested the move on grounds of discrimination. Authorities responded militarily, leading to the expulsion or voluntary migration of over 100,000 ethnic Nepalese, many of whom were secret Christians, to the Nepal side of the border in Jhapa in the early 1990s.

An absolute monarchy for over 100 years, Bhutan became a democratic, constitutional monarchy in March 2008, in accordance with the wish of former King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who served from 1972 to 2006. Since the advent of democracy, the country has brought in many reforms. It is generally believed that the government is gradually giving more freedom to its citizens.

The present king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, and Prime Minister Lyonchen Jigmey Thinley, are respected by almost all Bhutanese and are seen as benevolent rulers.