

Pastors Sentenced to Prison for Raising Financial Support

Two pastors have been sentenced to several years in prison for fund raising for personal gain in Bhutan, a small kingdom governed by a Buddhist monarchy that borders China and India in the eastern Himalaya mountains.

The attorney general in the capital Thimphu sentenced pastor Tandin Wangyal, 30, to nearly four years in prison without bail for committing a felony under the charge of soliciting funds from the public for personal gain. Pastor Mon Thapa, 56, has received a shorter sentence of two years and four months. Alternatively, he could pay a fine of 98,800 Ngultrum (\$1,630) instead of time in prison.

"I am already handed to the police now for detention," said Wangyal in a text message. "I may not be able to communicate after this [message]."

Wangyal has 10 days to submit his appeal.

"Chances are slim," said a local source, unnamed for security reasons. "This sad development has really shaken everyone. My mother and the other women of our church will visit Tandin's [Wangyal] family."

The men were arrested on March 5 while they were carrying a sick child to a clinic in a village. They had only arrived the previous day after an invitation to hold a three-day seminar for 30 Christians who came from neighboring towns.

They were detained under the charges of conducting a gathering for religious purpose without prior approval; showing a film without certificate of approval from media authorities and for collecting "illegal funds."

The pastors submitted their written defense to the court during their first hearing on May 5. At the next, on May 12, however, they received a second set of charges. This time, Wangyal was accused of fund raising for personal gain.

Wangyal then submitted a second written defense during the third and most recent trial on May 22, during which charges of collecting illegal funds against Thapa were dropped. However, Wangyal received new charges, which he denied, when the prosecutors found financial data on an external hard drive indicating that he had received funds from the public without official permission, which is a violation of the Civil Society Organization Act of Bhutan.

Bhutan's state religion is Buddhism, and other religions are barely tolerated, so life as a Christian is especially difficult. Church buildings are illegal, and non-Buddhists are not privy to the same benefits such as free education. Proselytism and incitement to convert are illegal. Bhutanese who convert to Christianity can lose their citizenship.

Charges of proselytism were dropped when, after intense questioning of the 30 Christians who took part in the three-day meeting, police said they found no proof that the two men had forced believers to convert to Christianity.

Bhutan's Home Minister Damcho Dorji told the *Business Bhutan* newspaper that religion played no part in the pastors' arrest.

"They had not obtained permission from local authorities," Dorji was quoted as saying. "This is a crime under the penal code... If you have violated this, it does not matter whether you are Buddhist, Hindu or Christian."

Bhutan is No. 31 on Open Doors' World Watch List, an annual ranking of countries where life as a Christian is most difficult. Christians endure threats and pressures from village heads and clerics to return to Buddhism. They can pray

and worship privately in their homes, but they struggle to meet in congregations and to obtain official permission to do so.