

Bhutan bans religious activity ahead of election

by [Vishal Arora](#) in the [November 14, 2012](#) issue

Political leaders in the tiny Buddhist nation of Bhutan have announced a nearly six-month ban on all public religious activities ahead of the upcoming elections, citing the Himalayan nation's constitution that says "religion shall remain above politics."

A notification by the Election Commission of Bhutan asks people's "prayers and blessings" for the second parliamentary election, expected in June 2013. But it also states that religious institutions and clergy "shall not hold, conduct, organize or host" any public activity from January 1 until the election.

The ban comes a year after the country's religious affairs ministry identified Buddhist and Hindu clergy who should be barred from voting to keep a clear distinction between religion and politics.

The commission's notification refers to a "noble national declaration" in the constitution calling for religion to be above politics while requiring religious institutions and figures to promote the Buddhist spiritual heritage. That rule "provides for the political system to be secular where religion is elevated to the higher pedestal," says the notification.

Election Commissioner Chogyel Dago Rigdzin explained that the ban is a "preventive measure" to avoid mixing of religion and politics. He claims it has "unstinted support and cooperation from all quarters."

However, the local daily *Kuensel* newspaper reports that people, clergy and politicians find the embargo ambiguous—and are concerned because rituals are part of people's lives in the nation of 700,000 people. Rigdzin admitted that "there will be gray areas and . . . complications" but added, "we have to deal with it."

Formerly a Buddhist monarchy for more than a century, Bhutan held its first democratic elections in 2008. The nation's constitution, which says that Mahayana Buddhism is the state religion, provides for funding for Buddhist monks. An editorial

in *Kuensel* said religion is kept above politics in Bhutan because “earthly games like politics” are for “the lesser mortals.”

Around 75 percent of the Bhutanese are Buddhist. Another 22 percent are Hindus, whose religion is the only other officially recognized one. Christians make up less than 2 percent of the people.

In many countries, misuse of religion is causing discord and tensions, said Tashi Gyeltshen, a filmmaker. “In Bhutan, it can be very tricky. It’s a very religious country,” he said. “Buddhism even provides for a Buddhist king. So what’s the problem with clergy’s participation in politics?” —RNS

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