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Bhutan bans religious activities ahead of election

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Political leaders in the small Buddhist nation of Bhutan have announced a nearly six-month ban on all public religious activities ahead of its upcoming elections, citing the Himalayan nation?s constitution, which says that ?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 Jan. 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,? the notification says.

Election Commissioner Chogyel Dago Rigdzin explained that the ban is a ?preventive measure? to avoid mixing 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 Himalayan nation of 700,000 people. Rigdzin admitted, ?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 Mahayana Buddhism is the state religion, provides for funding for Buddhist monks.

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

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