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Cambodia

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report

Report

September 13, 2011

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. Buddhism is the state religion.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 67,000 square miles and a population of 13.4 million. An estimated 93 percent of the population is Theravada Buddhist. The Theravada Buddhist tradition is widespread and strong in all provinces, with an estimated 4,392 pagodas throughout the country. The vast majority of ethnic Khmer Cambodians are Buddhist, and there is a close association between Buddhism, Khmer cultural traditions, and daily life. Adherence to Buddhism generally is considered intrinsic to the country's ethnic and cultural identity. The Mahayana school of Buddhism claims more than 34,000 followers and has 105 temples throughout the country.

Between 3.5 and 5 percent of the population, predominantly ethnic Cham, is Muslim and typically live in towns and rural fishing villages on the banks of the Tonle Sap Lake and the Mekong River, as well as in Kampot Province. There are four branches of Islam represented in the country: the Malay-influenced Shafi'i branch, practiced by 88 percent of Cham Muslims; the Saudi-Kuwaiti-influenced Salafi (Wahhabi) branch, which claims 6 percent of the total Muslim population, although this number is increasing; the indigenous Iman-San branch, practiced by 3 percent; and the Kadiani branch,

which also accounts for 3 percent. There are 280 mosques of the four main branches and 374 small suravs, which are meeting places that have congregations of up to 40 persons and do not have a minbar (pulpit) from which Friday sermons are given. Suravs may belong to any branch of Islam and are distinct from other types of mosques only in their architectural structure; they are usually much smaller and built in rural areas.

The small Christian community constitutes 2 percent of the population. There are an estimated 100 Christian organizations or denominations that operate freely throughout the country. There are 1,292 churches, of which 1,224 are Protestant and 68 are Catholic. In addition the country has 883 offices of prayer and 248 religious schools. Only an estimated 1,000 of these churches are officially registered. Other religious groups with small followings include the 3,000 ethnic Vietnamese Cao Dai and the 10,000 members of the Bahai Faith.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion, and the government does not tolerate abuse of religious freedom, either by governmental or private actors. Buddhism is the state religion, and the government promotes Buddhist holidays, provides Buddhist training and education to monks and others in pagodas, and modestly supports an institute that performs research and publishes materials on Khmer culture and Buddhist traditions.

The law requires all religious groups, including Buddhist groups, to submit applications to the Ministry of Cults and Religions if they wish to construct places of worship and conduct religious activities. In their applications, groups must state clearly their religious purposes and activities, which must comply with provisions forbidding religious groups from insulting other religious groups, creating disputes, or undermining national security. There is no penalty for failing to register, and some groups had not done so.

The government makes a legal distinction between churches and offices of prayer. Establishment of a church requires that the founders own the building and the land where the church is located. The facility must have a minimum capacity of 200 persons, and the permit application requires support of at least 100 congregants. By contrast an office of prayer can be located in rented facilities or on rented property and does not require a minimum capacity for the facility; the permit application requires only 20 supporters.

The Directive on Controlling External Religions requires registration of places of worship and religious schools; in addition it requires government approval prior to constructing new places of worship. Places of worship must be located at least two kilometers (1.24 miles) from each other and may not be used for political purposes or to house criminals or fugitives from the law. The distance requirement applies only to new construction of places of worship and not to offices of religious organizations. There have been no cases documented where the directive was used to bar a church or mosque from constructing a new facility. The directive also requires that religious groups refrain from openly criticizing other groups, although this provision is rarely tested.

The government permits Buddhist religious instruction in public schools. Other forms of religious instruction are prohibited in public schools; however, non-Buddhist religious instruction may be provided by private schools.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Khmer New Year, Pchum Ben (Ancestors' Day), Visakha Bochea (a day honoring the Buddha's birth and death), and Meak Bochea (a day honoring the Buddha's enlightenment).

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Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Unlike in 2009, Muslims and Christians reported no localized conflicts. Some Cham Muslims were well integrated into society, holding prominent positions in business and the government; however, these numbers were low compared to those for other religious groups, and surveys of Cham Muslims indicated they still perceived institutional and cultural barriers to full integration in society.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Embassy representatives engaged Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian groups, as well as leaders of several faith-based organizations.

The embassy continued its Muslim engagement efforts, which provide for additional channels of information on the status of tolerance and pluralism among the Muslim population. The embassy provided a scholarship program on English language training for two years to Muslim students and continued to provide financial support for the Voice of Cham radio station--the only Cham language radio program in the country--which provides a forum for discussion of religious and other issues. The embassy continued to work with several Buddhist temples on a faith-based approach to assist persons infected with and affected by HIV/AIDS.

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