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## Cambodia

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2010**

**November 17, 2010**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. Buddhism is the state religion.

The government generally respected religious freedom 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 over 34,000 followers and has 105 temples throughout the country.

There are approximately 464,000 Muslims (between 3.5 to 5 percent of the population), predominantly ethnic Cham, who 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. Some organizations cite lower estimates for the number of Cham Muslims. 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 (sometimes called "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 4 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 of the country.

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 Baha'i Faith.

## Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

### Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contribute to the generally free practice of religion. 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 in practice some groups do not. The Ministry of Cults and Religions issued a circular on December 18, 2009 to strengthen enforcement of legal documents and management of religions in the country.

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 on/in rented facilities/property, does not require a minimum capacity for the facility, and the permit application requires only 20 supporters.

The Directive on Controlling External Religions requires registration of places of worship and religious schools, in addition to government approval prior to constructing new places of worship. Places of worship must be located at least two kilometers 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, though this provision is rarely tested. During the reporting period, there were no reports that any religious groups encountered significant difficulties in obtaining approval for construction of places of worship; however, some groups mentioned that the approval process was often slow, requiring up to one year to complete.

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. In 2008 the government directed that all Muslim students and government employees be allowed to wear Islamic attire in class and in the office. Muslim community leaders praised the decision as reflecting the government's respect for the beliefs of those other than the Buddhist majority.

All major Theravada Buddhist holidays are observed by the government.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

Unlike in previous years, the government did not close any madrassahs (Islamic schools).

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

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

#### Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

Government officials planned to organize meetings for representatives of all religious groups to discuss religious developments and to address problems of concern. The Ministry of Cults and Religion aims to host two national interfaith meetings annually in preparation for the Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue. During the reporting period, however, no meetings were held. This was in part due to a lack of available funds for the events.

#### Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Minority religious groups experienced little or no societal discrimination during the reporting period; however, Muslims and Christians reported some minor localized conflicts.

Some Buddhists expressed concern about the Cham Muslim community receiving financial assistance from foreign countries, though this fear has subsided in recent years. Some Cham Muslims are 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 show they still perceive some 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 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.

Embassy personnel hosted a Ramadan reception in the capital of Kampong Cham province, the region home to the highest number of Muslims in the country. The event attracted more than 100 leaders of the community, including imams and heads of madrassahs.

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The embassy also worked to maintain close contact with the Buddhist and Christian religious communities through joint programs and visits to wats (Buddhist temples) and churches.

The United States Agency for International Development continued to work with several Buddhist temples on a faith-based approach to helping people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. Projects with Christian groups included embassy-hosted events for the "Little Sprouts," a program for AIDS orphans run by the Catholic Maryknoll sisters, and puppet shows presented by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) during U.S. military medical missions. These programs afforded embassy officers the opportunity to meet with both Buddhist and Christian religious figures on numerous occasions and assess the operating environment for religious groups in the country.

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