



Cambodia

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2009

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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 14.1 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 4,330 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 approximately 31,639 followers and has 88 temples throughout the country.

There are approximately 500,000 to 700,000 Muslims (between 3.5 to 5 percent of the population), predominantly ethnic Cham, who generally are found 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: 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 244 mosques of the 4 main branches and 333 small Suravs, which are meeting places that have congregations of up to 40 persons and do not have a minbar 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 but growing Christian community constitutes approximately 2 percent of the population. There are an estimated 100 Christian organizations or denominations that operate freely throughout the country. There are approximately 1,609 churches--1544 Protestant and 65 Roman Catholic. Only an estimated 900 of these churches are officially registered. Other religious groups with small followings include the ethnic Vietnamese Cao Dai and the Baha'i Faith, each with an estimated 2,000 practitioners.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed 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. Although the Ministry of Cults and Religions attempted to enforce a 2007 regulation requiring all churches to re-register in order to obtain a new operating license, no churches had complied within the reporting period.

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. During the reporting period, there were no reports that any religious groups encountered significant difficulties in obtaining approval for construction of places of worship.

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 directed that all Muslim students and government employees be allowed to wear Islamic attire in class and in the office. The decision reflected respect for the beliefs of those other than the Buddhist majority.

All major Theravada Buddhist holidays are observed by the Cambodian 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). The Government has granted permission for the construction of a new Islamic college which will provide general education and skills training to both Muslims and non-Muslims.

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

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

Government officials continued 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 typically hosts 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 July 2008 elections during which time a new Minister of Cults and Religions was selected.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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 minor conflicts that were personal in nature.

Some Buddhists expressed concern about the Cham Muslim community receiving financial assistance from foreign countries; however Cham Muslims were generally well integrated into society, held prominent positions in business and the Government, and faced no reported acts of discrimination or abuse during the reporting period.

There are ecumenical and interfaith organizations, which are often supported by funding from foreign public or private entities.

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 met with religious leaders on these issues and contacted representatives of religious nongovernmental organizations and other groups representing Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian religious groups.

The Embassy continued its Muslim engagement efforts, which provide for additional channels of information on the status of religious freedom among the Muslim population while also providing material assistance. The Embassy continued to provide financial support for the Voice of Cham radio station, which provides a forum for discussion of religious and other issues and is the only Cham language radio program in the country. The Embassy hosted a Ramadan reception in Phnom Penh, with more than 150 Cham Muslim guests, and hosted an iftar for the Cham community in Kampot, a region approximately three hours south of Phnom Penh. The event attracted more than 100 leaders of the community, including imams, heads of madrassahs, and religious teachers.

The Embassy has worked to maintain close contact with the Buddhist and Christian religious communities through visits to wats (Buddhist temples) and churches and through joint programs. The Embassy hosted a series of seminars to promote a closer relationship between the Cham community and law enforcement officials in an attempt to broaden dialogue and promote community policing.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) 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 their religious groups in the country.