



Cambodia

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

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The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

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 69,900 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 4,100 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 150,000 followers and has 63 temples throughout the country.

There are approximately 500,000 to 700,000 Muslims (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 and Mekong Rivers and in Kampot Province. Some organizations that work with or have contacts in the Cham Muslim population cite lower estimates for the number of Cham Muslims in the country. 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 and 333 Surav mosques, which are typically small, located in rural areas, lack a minbar from which Friday sermons are given, and may be affiliated with any branch except for the Iman-San branch.

The small but growing Christian community constitutes approximately 2 percent of the population. An estimated 100 Christian organizations or denominations operate freely throughout the country. There are approximately 900 officially registered churches; however, a total of 1,609 churches (1,544 Protestant, 65 Catholic) exist within the country. 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 law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, 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 Religious Affairs 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 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 2 kilometers from each other and may not be used for political purposes or to house criminals or fugitives from the law. The distance limitation has begun to be enforced but applies only to new construction of places of worship and not to offices of religious organizations. The order requires that religious teachings respect other religious groups. During the period covered by this report, there were no reports that any religious groups encountered significant difficulties in obtaining approval for construction of places of worship; however, some Christian groups reported that the Ministry of Cults and Religion has not recently registered any new churches due to internal factions within the Ministry.

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 May 2008 the Government directed that all Muslim students be allowed to wear Islamic attire in class.

The Government observes all major Theravada Buddhist holidays as national holidays.

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 period covered by this report.

In June 2007 the Ministry of Cults and Religions reissued restrictions from 2003 on proselytizing. The restrictions banned door-to-door activities, using loudspeakers, or providing material incentives for conversion; however, humanitarian activities by missionary groups are encouraged, and the services they provide are often appreciated by government officials, provided they are not perceived as a guise for involvement in political or illegal activities. According to various Christian groups, they have not been seriously affected by these restrictions and for the most part agree with the salient points in the announcement.

In August 2007 there was one report of a Christian group encountering difficulties in obtaining approval for a religious convention. Local missionaries connected with the U.S.-based Joyce Meyer Ministries, Assemblies of God, and other local evangelical churches organized a weekend-long gathering at a large local theater and at the Olympic Stadium in Phnom Penh. On August 10, 2007, with a reported 3,000-4,000 attendees present, district police closed down the gathering, telling the organizers they did not have permission to be there. On August 11, local authorities again said the group did not have permission to gather. The events were subsequently moved to a small church in Phnom Penh. Organizers claimed the Ministry of Cults and Religion refused to grant them permission to hold their event, and they thus went to the Ministries of Interior and Education. These two ministries provided written permission for the gatherings. Organizers reported that a similar gathering in Battambang was similarly shut down; however, similar Christian gatherings in Kampong Cham and Kampong Thom took place as planned. Throughout the course of these events, there were no reports of violence committed by event organizers or the Government.

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

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 of the refusal to allow such citizens 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 address problems of concern. The Ministry of Cults and Religion hosts two interfaith meetings annually during which time leaders from various religious groups hold a conference on religious harmony. During the period covered by this report, meetings were held in November 2007 and February 2008 in Phnom Penh. Each group gave a presentation on its faith and respective religious activities. There were approximately 700 attendees and 60 religious congregations contributing to the February 2008 meeting. Prime Minister Hun Sen spoke at the February meeting and stated that religious harmony is important to the country.

In May 2008 two Islamic prayer rooms were opened at the Phnom Penh International Airport, illustrating increasing government acceptance of other religions.

In May 2008 the Government directed that all Muslim students be allowed to wear Islamic attire in class.

In April 2008 the Government co-hosted the Fourth Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue. The Phnom Penh Dialogue 2008 on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace and Harmony included representatives from Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Fiji, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam. Prime Minister Hun Sen, as well as senior representatives from the host and cosponsoring countries, endorsed the principle of a culture of peace and religious harmony.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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

Minority religious groups experienced little or no societal discrimination during the period covered by this report; however, Muslims and Christians reported minor conflicts that were personal in nature.

Occasional tensions were reported among the branches of Islam that receive monetary support from groups in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Malaysia, or Indonesia, depending on the tenets of the branch.

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 period covered by this report.

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

The Embassy continued its Islamic outreach efforts, which provide for additional channels of information on the status of religious freedom in the country among the Muslim population while also providing material

assistance. The Embassy continued to provide financial support for the Cham Muslim radio hour, which provides a forum for discussion of religious and other issues and was the only Cham language radio program in the country. The Embassy again hosted a Ramadan reception, with more than 150 Cham Muslim guests joining the Ambassador at his residence.

Similarly, the Embassy worked to maintain close contacts with the Buddhist and Christian religious communities through visits to wats (Buddhist temples) and churches and through joint programs. The U.S. Government continued to work with several Buddhist temples on a faith-based approach to helping persons 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 these religious groups in the country.

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