



Laos

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, other laws and policies restricted this right in practice. The Prime Minister's Decree on Religious Practice (Decree 92) is the principal legal instrument defining rules for religious practice; it institutionalizes the Government's role as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities. Although this decree has contributed to greater religious tolerance since it was promulgated in 2002, authorities have used its many conditions to restrict some aspects of religious practice.

During the period covered by this report, the overall status of respect for religious freedom did not significantly change. The law does not recognize a state religion; however, the Government's financial support and promotion of Buddhism, along with its willingness to exempt Buddhism from a number of restrictions, gave the religion an elevated status. The Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), a popular front organization for the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), was responsible for oversight of religious practice. In most areas, officials generally respected the constitutionally guaranteed rights of members of most religious groups to worship, albeit within strict constraints imposed by the Government. Authorities in some parts of the country continued to be suspicious of non-Buddhist religious communities and displayed intolerance for minority religious practice, particularly Protestant groups, whether or not they were officially recognized.

Local officials reportedly interfered with the right of Protestants to worship in a number of places, particularly in Luang Prabang, Xiang Khouang, and Phongsali provinces. Arrests and detentions of Protestants occurred during the reporting period in Luang Namtha, Oudomsai, Bokeo, and Vientiane provinces. Local officials have pressured minority Protestants to renounce their faith on threat of arrest or forceful eviction from their villages in Bolikhamsai, Houaphan, and Luang Namtha provinces. In some areas, Protestants have been forbidden to gather to worship.

At the end of the period covered by this report, there were two known religious prisoners. There were also at least 16 other Protestants who were apparently being detained for reasons other than their religion, although religion was suspected to have been a contributing factor in their arrests.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice; however, conflicts between ethnic groups and movement among villages sometimes exacerbated religious tensions. Proselytizing and rights to village resources were particular points of contention. Frictions also arose over the refusal of some members of minority religious groups, particularly Protestants, to participate in Buddhist or animist religious ceremonies. The efforts of some Protestant congregations to establish churches independent of the government-sanctioned Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) continued to cause strains within the Protestant community.

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The Embassy also maintained frequent contact with religious leaders. Official visitors from the U.S. Government, including a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, have reinforced embassy efforts by raising religious freedom issues during their meetings with Lao officials.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 85,000 square miles and a population of 6.4 million. Theravada Buddhism is the faith of nearly all of the ethnic or "lowland" Lao population; however, lowland Lao constitute only 40-50 percent of the overall population of the country. The remainder of the population belongs to at least 48 distinct ethnic

minority groups. Most of these ethnic minorities are practitioners of animism, with beliefs that vary greatly among groups. Animism is predominant among most Sino-Thai groups, such as the Thai Dam and Thai Daeng, as well as among Mon-Khmer and Burmo-Tibetan groups. Even among lowland Lao, many pre-Buddhist animistic beliefs have been incorporated into Theravada Buddhist practice. Roman Catholics and Protestants constitute approximately 2 percent of the population. Other minority religious groups include those practicing the Baha'i Faith, Islam, Mahayana Buddhism, and Confucianism. A very small number of citizens follow no religion.

Theravada Buddhism is by far the most prominent organized religion in the country, with more than 4,000 temples serving as the focus of religious practice and the center of community life in rural areas. In most lowland Lao villages, religious tradition remains strong. Most Buddhist men spend some part of their lives as monks in temples, even if only for a few days. There are approximately 20,000 monks in the country, more than 8,000 of whom have attained the rank of "senior monk," indicating years of study in temples. In addition, more than 400 nuns, many of whom are older widows, reside in temples throughout the country. The Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization (LBFO) is under the direction of a supreme patriarch who resides in Vientiane and supervises the activities of the LBFO's central office, the Ho Thammasapha.

Although officially incorporated into the dominant Mahanikai School of Buddhist Practice after 1975, the Thammayudh sect of Buddhism still maintains a following in the country. Abbots and monks of several temples, particularly in Vientiane, reportedly follow the Thammayudh School, which places greater emphasis on meditation and discipline.

There are four Mahayana Buddhist temples in Vientiane, two serving the ethnic Vietnamese community and two serving the ethnic Chinese community. Buddhist monks from Vietnam, China, and India have visited these temples freely to conduct services and minister to worshippers. There are at least four large Mahayana Buddhist pagodas in other urban centers and smaller Mahayana temples in villages near the borders of Vietnam and China.

Church officials estimate there are approximately 45,000 Catholics; many are ethnic Vietnamese, concentrated in major urban centers and surrounding areas along the Mekong River in the central and southern regions. The Catholic Church has an established presence in five of the most populous central and southern provinces, and Catholics are generally able to worship openly. No ordained Catholic priests operated in the north, and the Church's activities there remain restricted. There are four bishops, two located in Vientiane and the others in Thakhek and Pakse. One of the bishops oversees the Vientiane Diocese and is responsible for the central part of the country. The second bishop resident in Vientiane is the Bishop of Luang Prabang. He is assigned to the northern part of the country. While the Government did not permit him to take up his post, it did permit him to travel intermittently to visit church congregations in the north. The Catholic Church's property in Luang Prabang was seized after the current Government took power in 1975, and there is no longer a parsonage in that city. An informal Catholic training center in Thakhek, Khammouan Province, prepared a small number of priests to serve the Catholic community. Catholic personnel have also been able to go to Australia and the Philippines for training. Several foreign nuns temporarily serve in the Vientiane Diocese and work with families, the elderly, and younger members.

The Protestant community has grown rapidly over the past decade, and LEC officials estimate their members to number as many as 100,000. More than 400 LEC congregations conduct services throughout the country. The LEC maintains properties in the cities of Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Pakse, and LEC officials confirm LEC ownership is recognized in all three locations by the authorities. Many Protestants are members of ethnic Mon-Khmer groups, especially the Khmu in the north and the Brou in Savannakhet and nearby provinces. Protestantism also have expanded rapidly in the Hmong and Yao communities. In urban areas, Protestantism has attracted many lowland Lao followers. Most Protestants are concentrated in Vientiane Municipality, in the provinces of Vientiane, Sayaboury, Luang Prabang, Xiang Khouang, Bolikhamsai, Savannakhet, Champasak, and Attapeu, as well as in the former Saisomboun Special Zone, but smaller congregations are located throughout the country. Seventh-day Adventists number slightly more than 1,200 countrywide, the majority of whom reside in Vientiane Municipality. The group also has congregations in Bokeo, Bolikhamsai, Champasak, Luang Prabang, and Xiang Khouang provinces.

Christian groups that have some following, but which are not recognized by the Government, include Methodists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Church of Christ, Assemblies of God, Lutherans, Church of Jesus Christ of

Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Baptists. Official membership numbers are not available.

All three approved Christian groups own properties in Vientiane Municipality. In addition, three informal churches, one each for English-speakers, Korean-speakers, and Chinese-speakers, serve Vientiane's foreign Protestant community.

There are approximately 500 adherents of Islam, the vast majority of whom are foreign permanent residents of South Asian and Cambodian (ethnic Cham) origin. There are two active mosques in Vientiane that follow the Sunni branch of Islam, but both are open to visits by Shi'ites as well.

Baha'i leaders estimated the Baha'i Faith has 8,500 adherents. A 9-member Baha'i National Spiritual Assembly oversees Baha'i activities including its four centers: two in Vientiane Municipality, one in Vientiane Province, and one in Savannakhet Province. A small number of Baha'is also live in Khammouane Province and in Pakse City in Champasak Province, and outreach is underway in Luang Prabang Province.

Small groups of followers of Confucianism and Taoism practice their beliefs in the larger cities.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution, promulgated in 1991, provides for freedom of religion; however, other laws and policies, particularly at the local level, sometimes violated this right. Article 30 of the Constitution provides for freedom of religion, a fact frequently cited by officials in reference to religious tolerance. Article 9 of the Constitution, however, discourages all acts that create divisions among religious groups and persons. The Government has interpreted this clause to justify restrictions on religious practice by all religious groups, including the Buddhist majority and animists. Both local and central government officials widely refer to Article 9 as a reason for placing constraints on religious practice, especially proselytizing and the expansion of Protestantism among minority groups. The Constitution also notes that the state "mobilizes and encourages" Buddhist monks and novices as well as priests of other religions to participate in activities "beneficial to the nation and the people." Although official pronouncements acknowledge the positive benefits of religion and the existence of different religious groups, they emphasize religion's potential to divide, distract, and destabilize.

Decree 92 is the principal legal instrument defining rules for religious practice. Decree 92 defines the Government's role as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities. Although this decree has contributed to greater religious tolerance since it was promulgated in 2002, authorities have used its many conditions to restrict some aspects of religious practice, particularly at the provincial and district levels.

In its 20 articles, Decree 92 establishes guidelines for religious activities in a broad range of areas. While the decree provides that the Government "respects and protects legitimate activities of believers," it also seeks to ensure that religious practice "conforms to the laws and regulations." Decree 92 legitimizes proselytizing by Lao citizens, printing religious materials, owning and building houses of worship, and maintaining contact with overseas religious groups; however, all of these rights are contingent upon a strict approval process. Decree 92 reserves for the LFNC the "right and duty to manage and promote" religious practice, requiring that nearly all aspects of religious practice receive the approval of an LFNC branch office. Some cases require approval from the central level LFNC. In practice, the Government used the approval process to restrict the religious activities of certain groups and has effectively limited or prevented some religious denominations from importing Bibles and religious materials as well as constructing houses of worship. Many minority religious leaders complained that the requirement to obtain permission, sometimes from several different offices for a broad range of activities, greatly limited their freedom.

The Government officially recognized four religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Baha'i Faith. Recognized Christian groups include the Catholic Church, the LEC, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Although Decree 92 establishes procedures for new denominations to register, the Government's desire to consolidate religious practice for purposes of control has effectively blocked new registrations. The LFNC's Order Number 1 of March 2004 required all Protestant groups to become a part of the LEC or the Seventh-day

Adventist Church. The order stated that no other Christian denominations would be permitted to register, a measure to prevent "disharmony" in the religious community. Although denominations not registered with the LFNC are not legally allowed to practice their faith, several do so quietly without interference.

The Government required several religious groups, apparently with the exception of Buddhists and Catholics, to report membership information periodically to the Religious Affairs Department of the LFNC. The Government also maintained restrictions on the publication of religious materials that applied to most religious groups, except for Buddhists.

Although the Government does not recognize an official state religion, the Government's exemption of Buddhism from many of the Decree 92 restrictions, sponsorship of Buddhist facilities, increased incorporation of Buddhist ritual and ceremony in state functions, and promotion of Buddhism as an element of the country's cultural and spiritual identity gave Theravada Buddhism an elevated status.

Both the Constitution and Decree 92 assert that religious practice should serve national interests by promoting development and education and instructing believers to be good citizens. The Government presumed both a right and a duty to oversee religious practice at all levels to ensure religious practice fills these roles in society. In effect this has led the Government to intervene in the activities of minority religious groups, particularly Protestants, on the grounds that their practices did not promote national interests or demonstrated disloyalty to the Government.

In some areas where animism predominated among ethnic minority groups, local authorities have actively encouraged those groups to adopt Buddhism and abandon their "backward" beliefs in magic and spirits. The Government discouraged animist practices that it regarded as outdated, unhealthy, or illegal, such as the practice in some tribes of killing children born with defects or burying the bodies of deceased relatives underneath homes.

Since 2001 the Government has more closely scrutinized the activities of the small Muslim community in Vientiane but has not interfered with its religious activities. Muslims were able to practice their faith openly and attend the two active mosques. Daily prayers and the weekly Jumaat prayer on Fridays proceeded unobstructed, and all Islamic celebrations were allowed. Government officials, including LFNC members, from Vientiane Municipality and the local level, were invited to and attended Islamic festivals. Muslims were permitted to go on the Hajj but apparently none have done so recently because of the expense. Groups have come from Thailand to conduct Tabligh teachings for adherents. Local Muslims joined with members of other religious groups to represent the Government at Interfaith Conferences on Religion in Indonesia in 2006 and in Cambodia in early 2008.

Persons arrested or convicted for religious offenses had little protection under the law. Detained persons may be held for lengthy periods without trial. Court judges, not juries, decided guilt or innocence in court cases, and the defense rights of the accused were limited. All religious groups, including Buddhists, practice their faith in an atmosphere in which application of the law is arbitrary. Certain actions interpreted by officials as threatening brought harsh punishment. Religious practice was "free" only if practitioners stayed within tacitly understood guidelines of activity acceptable to the Government.

The Government typically refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing on the part of its officials, even in egregious cases of religious persecution. Blame was usually attributed to the victims rather than the persecuting officials. In some past cases, officials concocted patently unbelievable explanations for events in order to exonerate local officials. While the Government has sometimes admitted that local officials are often part of the problem, it has been unwilling to take action against officials who have violated laws and regulations on religious freedom.

Although the Government did not maintain diplomatic relations with the Holy See, representatives of the Papal Nuncio have visited from Thailand and coordinated with the Government on assistance programs, especially for lepers and persons with disabilities.

The Government requires and routinely granted permission for formal links with coreligionists in other countries. In practice the line between formal and informal links was blurred, and relations generally were

established without much difficulty.

There was no religious instruction in public schools nor were there any parochial or religiously affiliated schools. However, several private preschools and English language schools received support from religious groups abroad. Many boys spent some time in Buddhist temples, where they received instruction in religion as well as academics. Temples traditionally have filled the role of schools and continued to play this role in smaller communities where formal education was limited or unavailable. Christian denominations, particularly the LEC and Seventh-day Adventists, operated Sunday schools for children and young persons. Baha'i Spiritual Assemblies conducted religious training for children as well as adult members.

While animists generally experienced little interference from the Government in their religious practices, the Government actively discouraged animist practices that it deemed outdated, unhealthful, or illegal.

The Government generally did not interfere with citizens wishing to travel abroad for short-term religious training. In previous reporting periods, the Government required that citizens exiting the country receive an exit stamp. This requirement was eliminated in 2007.

The Government observes the That Luang Festival and the Lao New Year, which have religious overtones, as national holidays. The Government generally allowed major religious festivals of all established congregations without hindrance, and government officials attended some Buddhist religious festivals in their official capacity.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Throughout the country, religious practice was restrained by official rules and policies that only allowed religious groups to practice their faith under circumscribed conditions. However, the government structure is relatively decentralized, and central government control over provincial and district governments remains limited. As a result, the Government's tolerance of religion varied by region and by religion. Local officials were often unaware of government policies on topics such as religious tolerance due to the incomplete dissemination and application of existing laws and regulations and, when aware of the laws, often failed to enforce them. The LFNC at times visited areas where religious persecution had taken place in order to instruct local officials on government policy and regulation. More often, however, the LFNC's Religious Affairs Department encouraged local or provincial governments to resolve conflicts on their own and in accordance with Decree 92.

Protestant groups that wanted to be recognized as separate from the LEC continued to be the targets of most restrictions. However, in some areas unauthorized churches have generally been allowed to conduct services without hindrance by local authorities. Within the LEC, some congregations have sought greater independence and have forged their own connections with Protestant groups abroad. Authorities in several provinces insisted that independent church congregations return to the LEC, but in other areas authorities allowed independent churches to conduct services without hindrance.

For a number of years Methodists have consistently sought to register with the LFNC as a separate denomination. In early 2006 some village and district officials appeared to be taking a stronger stance against unauthorized Methodist congregations; however, this reportedly tapered off in late 2006 and appeared to occur less frequently during the reporting period.

Between 1999 and 2001 local authorities closed approximately 20 of Vientiane Province's 60 LEC churches. Beginning in 2002, most of these churches were allowed to reopen. However, officials in several districts of Savannakhet Province did not allow local congregations, despite requests, to reopen as many as 6 of the province's approximately 40 churches, and they remained closed at the end of the reporting period. Despite requests that a church building in Dong Nong Khun Village, which was confiscated by local officials in 2000, be returned to its congregation, provincial officials stated in 2007 that the number of Protestants in the village was not sufficient to warrant having a church even though local Protestants claimed more than 120 worshippers.

As many as 200 of the LEC's nearly 400 congregations do not have permanent church structures and conduct worship services in members' homes. Since the 2002 promulgation of Decree 92, officials from the LFNC's

Religious Affairs Department have stated that home churches should be replaced with designated church structures whenever possible. The LEC has encountered difficulties registering new congregations and receiving permission to establish new places of worship or repair existing facilities, particularly in Luang Prabang City and Attapeu, Luang Namtha, and Savannakhet provinces. No new LEC churches were permitted during the reporting period. Although central authorities say they support the construction of new churches, this requires local-level concurrence, and most village and district LFNC offices have refused permission. In a few cases, villages have allowed construction of new church buildings without prior official permission from higher level authorities; however, problems have occurred when district or provincial officials became aware of the "illegal" construction. Home churches have thus remained the only viable place of worship for many LEC congregations.

Baha'i spiritual assemblies in Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Champasak cities generally practiced without hindrance, and Baha'i groups faced fewer restrictions from local authorities than in the past. However, smaller communities in Savannakhet Province periodically faced restrictions by local authorities, including limitations on both the nature and extent of some religious activities. One of the nine districts within Vientiane Municipality has also imposed restrictions on Baha'i activities that the LFNC has been asked to resolve. The Baha'i are working to reestablish links with Baha'i adherents believed to still live in villages in Khammouan Province, where there had been more than 1000 believers in the past.

During the reporting period there were no reports of official interference with or denial of permission to hold religious celebrations in churches, but there were reports that Protestants in some villages were not allowed to hold Christian celebrations in their homes, thus restricting Protestant activities to church buildings only. This was particularly a problem for Protestants who had not been given approval to build church structures in their villages. For example, Protestants in Nakun Village, Bolikhamsai Province, and Xunya Village, Luang Namtha Province, have reportedly been restricted in their ability to hold religious meetings and celebrations in their homes. Protestants in both villages also have not been given approval to build church structures.

Longstanding restrictions on the Catholic Church's operations in the north resulted in the continued existence of only a handful of small congregations in Luang Prabang, Sayaboury, Bokeo, and Luang Namtha provinces as well as some village communities in Vientiane Province. Catholics in these areas sporadically held services in homes. There were no ordained Catholic priests in the north, and pastoral visits from Vientiane were intermittent. However, there were signs during the reporting period that the Government was slowly easing its control over the Catholic community in the north. Several church properties, including a school in Vientiane Municipality, were seized by the Government after 1975 and have not been returned, nor has the Government provided restitution.

The Government strictly prohibited foreigners from proselytizing, although it permitted foreign NGOs with religious affiliations to work in the country. Although Decree 92 permits proselytizing by religious practitioners provided they obtain permission from the LFNC, the LFNC did not grant such permission, and persons found evangelizing risked harassment or arrest. In previous reporting periods, authorities arrested and expelled foreigners attempting to proselytize, but there were no reports of this during the period covered by this report.

The Government permitted the printing, import, and distribution of Buddhist religious material.

Although Decree 92 authorized the printing and importation of non-Buddhist religious texts and allowed religious materials to be imported from abroad, it also required permission for such activities from the LFNC. While in practice some groups were able to print their own religious materials, Baha'i and Christian groups faced challenges. The Government did not allow the printing of Bibles, and special permission was required for their importation for distribution. No Bibles were known to have been imported during the reporting period, and authorities have seized religious tracts and teaching materials from Protestants entering the country from abroad, including at the Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge. At least one Thai pastor was fined for trying to do so. However, there were no reports of arrests associated with these confiscations, as had occurred in previous years. Several non-Christian groups indicated that they have not been restricted in bringing religious materials into the country.

Identity cards did not specify religion, nor did family "household registers" or passports, two other important forms of identification. On occasion local officials withheld new government ID cards or household registration documents from Protestants and denied educational benefits to their children because of their religious beliefs

or threatened to withhold official documentation unless they renounced their faith. In 2007 officials in Sayaboury Province reportedly refused to issue travel documents to some, and would not accept their children into local schools or hospitals.

From late 2006 through the end of the reporting period, local officials in Xunya Village of Luang Namtha Province reportedly restricted in the rights of more than 200 Protestants--mostly Yao, Khmu, and Hmong--to worship freely. Central-level LFNC officials visited Luang Namtha in February 2007 to discuss the Xunya situation and educate local Christians on their rights and the requirements for construction of new churches. However, reports indicated that problems intensified in March 2007, when local officials reportedly refused permission to hold a Christian funeral service for a deceased member of the local Protestant community. Representatives from a foreign-based religious group, accompanied by two LEC representatives, attempted to visit Xunya in early April but were prevented from doing so by local police and military personnel. Although the LFNC in Vientiane issued a document on April 2, 2007, supporting the right of Christians in Xunya to worship, and sent the document to the LFNC and police officials in Luang Namtha, the impact of the document was negligible. In May 2007 the LFNC reportedly gave permission for Christian weddings and funerals to take place in the village, but Protestants were still not allowed to gather for worship services. More recently, the situation was believed to be improving, and 2 or 3 village Christian families were reportedly allowed to gather as a group for worship twice each month.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Government continued to arrest and detain persons for their religious activities, though this occurred less frequently than in previous reporting periods. Other persons were officially detained for reasons other than religion, although religion was considered to be a factor. Efforts by local officials to force Protestants to renounce their faith continued in certain areas. In some cases, officials threatened religious minorities with arrest or expulsion from their villages if they did not comply.

At the end of the period covered by this report, two known prisoners remained in custody primarily for religious reasons. In January 2007 Khamstone Baccam, an ethnic Thai Dam man described as a Protestant leader, was arrested in Oudomsai Province. The Government was unwilling to acknowledge that he was being held, and multiple requests for information about his status remained unanswered. In 1999 authorities arrested two members of the Lao Evangelical Church in Oudomsai Province, Nyoht and Thongchanh, and charged them with treason and sedition, although their arrests appeared to have been for proselytizing. Nyoht was sentenced to 12 years in prison and died in prison in 2006. Thongchanh was sentenced to 15 years and remained in prison in Oudomsai at the end of this reporting period, although his sentence was reduced to 10 years in the annual government review at the end of 2006.

There are a number of cases in which Christians have been arrested for reasons other than religion, but in which religion may have played a factor.

In February 2008 authorities reportedly arrested 58 people from 15 families during raids on Sai Jareun and Fai villages in Bokeo Province. Those arrested were described as Hmong Christians who had fled persecution in Vietnam possibly as early as 2002 and were apparently part of the Sai Jareun Village congregation. Reports circulated that some or all of those arrested had been sentenced to prison or deported to Vietnam. One foreign organization claimed that nine Hmong church leaders from the area were sentenced to 15 years in prison on February 22, 2008; however, no local sources corroborated the report of imprisonments, and the Government denied that anyone from the area was sentenced to prison. One senior official confirmed that a number of persons were deported to Vietnam, but of those deported, there was no indication that any were in Laos legally. The same official described any deportations that had occurred as resulting from the investigation of the earlier clash between authorities and drug traffickers.

In early 2008 a group of Khmu pastors was stopped while attempting to cross the border from Bokeo Province into Thailand. An earlier group of Khmu pastors reportedly had crossed without incident. The members of the second group were stopped, searched, and arrested. There is no indication that the group was trying to cross the border legally. They were reportedly still incarcerated and awaiting sentencing at the end of the reporting period.

Bokeo Province, which borders both Burma and Thailand, is located on a major transit route for

methamphetamine trafficking and thus hosts a concentration of law enforcement activity. In July 2007 attacks by the authorities led to the deaths of 13 Hmong Christians and arrests of others from Bokeo's Sai Jareun Village, reportedly because of a perception of some possible connection to the dwindling but still ongoing insurgency. Although the reports of the fighting appear accurate, the official government response was that those involved were actually involved in trafficking illegal narcotics and resisted police attempts to arrest them. Following the original incident, according to later reports, movement of people within the area was highly restricted for some time, and many were jailed, including one Hmong church leader sentenced to five years in prison. Subsequent reports claimed that the church in Sai Jareun Village, which had numbered more than 1,000 members before this situation arose, had fewer than 30 in the aftermath of the crackdown.

In March 2007 Protestants in Nakun Village of Bolikhamsai Province were reportedly harassed, subjected to "reeducation," and asked to sign statements indicating that they had engaged in proselytizing. In May 2007 seven of the ten Christian families in Nakun Village were reportedly forced to resettle in another village after refusing to renounce their Protestant beliefs. According to Protestants following the incident, village officials had suggested that Protestant villagers convert to Buddhism or to their previously held animist beliefs. The same officials reportedly told villagers that Protestantism is not good because it is an American religion.

In March 2007 more than 100 Protestants in Nam Deua Village of Bolikhamsai Province's Pakading District were reportedly told by village and district officials that they could not believe in Christianity because it was an "American religion." The officials threatened them with expulsion unless they gave up their religious beliefs, although at the end of the reporting period none had been expelled.

After a February 2007 insurgent attack on an army camp near Vang Vieng in northern Vientiane Province, which reportedly killed two Lao Army soldiers, Vang Vieng officials were said to have allowed 10 local Hmong and Khmu Christian families to move from Vientiane Province to neighboring Bokeo, Luang Namtha, and Oudomsay provinces, although the Vang Vieng officials did not provide the legal documents required for such a move. After a short period, the Vang Vieng officials reportedly required the families to return to Vang Vieng, where the male heads of family--seven Hmong and three Khmu--reportedly were detained at Vientiane Province's Thong Harb Prison. In August 2007 three men said to be pastors went to the prison to ask why the men were being held. The pastors themselves were then imprisoned but released in October after each paid a fine of \$100 (960,000 kip). Of the original 10 detainees, one reportedly died in late 2007 and another in May 2008. The other eight remained in Thong Harb Prison.

In February 2007 Bolikhamsai Province officials indicated that two Buddhist monks had been arrested for being ordained without government approval and for celebrating inappropriately following the ordination ceremony. The two were reportedly only detained a short time before being released.

There have been a number of cases of officials pressuring Protestants to renounce their belief.

In May 2008 ethnic minority Protestants in Phongsali Province reportedly faced pressure from provincial LFNC officials who wanted to reduce the province's number of Protestants, which had recently grown to 500 from a traditional base of 300 believers. Details on the types of pressure involved were not available at the end of the reporting period.

In March 2007 officials in Nam Deua District of Bolikhamsai Province reportedly pressured some Protestants to renounce their beliefs.

In January 2007 several Christian families in Long District of Luang Namtha Province were reportedly pressured by local and district officials to renounce their Christian beliefs or be expelled from their villages. Although some of the 23 ethnic Yao and Hmong Christian families in Long District refused to sign the document renouncing their faith, no one was forced to leave the village. At the end of the reporting period there was no report that any action was taken against the families. However, in August 2007 three local Protestant leaders from Namoon Village of Long District were reportedly falsely accused of various offenses including receiving money from foreign Christian organizations to pursue underground Christian ministries. They were incarcerated for more than two months before being released in October 2007.

In January 2007 officials in Xiang Kho District of Houaphan Province reportedly threatened several Protestant

families with expulsion if they did not renounce their beliefs; however, despite refusals, there were no reports of expulsions.

In early 2007 church members in Houaysay Noi Village, Bokeo Province, were given approval to meet in a house church. The village had previously experienced problems, as in late 2005 when local officials destroyed an unapproved LEC church in Houaysay Noi Village and arrested six church leaders. One of the six died while in jail, and the other five were released in early 2006. In January 2007 a visiting LFNC official and the village chief advised residents of Houaysay Noi Village that they could believe as they wished but would not be allowed to construct a church. The officials also told the 19 Christian families in the village that they could continue to meet at their house church as long as they used no visible religious symbols that could identify the house as an "official religious structure." At the end of the reporting period, local officials continued to refuse to issue a construction permit.

In December 2006 five ethnic Yao Protestants were arrested in Luang Namtha Province for constructing a church building without appropriate authorization. The five men were released in January 2007, reportedly after complying with a local official's request that they sign a document renouncing their faith. Since their release, the men have reportedly been closely watched by local officials and have not been allowed to gather for worship services.

In November 2006 two ethnic Khmu U.S. Legal Permanent Residents who were visiting Khon Khen Village in Vientiane Province's Hinheup District were detained after participating in and videotaping a Protestant celebration in the village. The two, a pastor and his wife, were released after three-weeks' detention and payment of a \$9,000 (88 million kip) fine. Also in November 2006 an additional 13 ethnic Khmu Protestants were arrested in Khon Khen Village. According to government officials, 1 of the 13 was quickly released after it was discovered that he was a local official. Nine of the 12 other Khmu Protestants were released from a police detention facility in May 2007. Three pastors, considered the leaders of the group, were released by the end of 2007.

In August 2006 two LEC members in Saveth Village, Savannakhet Province, were arrested, reportedly for being outspoken about their faith. The two men were held without charges for several months. Eventually, they were charged with "causing division in society" and sentenced to six months in prison. The two were released in February 2007.

From June through July 2006, a Protestant man in Nam Heng Village of Oudomsai Province was reportedly jailed for possessing ammunition at his residence. According to the LEC, the man had completed his service in the military and did have a small amount of ammunition at his residence, not unusual in remote villages where people engage in hunting. The Protestant community, however, regarded the ammunition as an excuse for his arrest, believing the real reason was local officials' opposition to his Christianity. The man was released in July following payment of a \$200 (1,961,000 kip) fine.

In April 2006 district officials in Salavan Province placed Adern, an LEC member who refused the village chief's order to renounce his faith, under house arrest. He was reportedly from one of four Protestant families that had lived in the village, two of which had reportedly been forced to leave by the time of his arrest. During the first 10 days of house arrest he was reportedly bound with wrist and ankle shackles but was then unshackled and allowed to move freely in his home. Adern was released from house arrest in July 2006.

In early 2006 lands belonging to several Protestant families in Nam Heng Village of Oudomsai Province were reportedly confiscated by the village chief and redistributed to other villagers. Some other Protestants who had previously resettled in the village were said to have returned to their home province of Phongsali after being pressured by the village chief. According to officials and the LEC, the land confiscation issue was resolved in mid-2006. Local Protestants in the village indicated in early 2007 that, while opposition to Christianity may have complicated the issue, most of those whose lands were confiscated had moved to Nam Heng Village without government authorization.

In 2005 authorities in Bolikhamsai Province detained a group of 27 ethnic Hmong. The group--all but one minors at the time they were initially detained--were residents at the Petchabun displaced-persons' settlement in northern Thailand, and were irregularly deported back to Laos by Thai authorities who considered them

illegal immigrants. Some sources indicated that the group members were Christians and may have been detained in Laos in part due to their religious affiliation. Six of the 27 Hmong were apparently still in detention or otherwise unaccounted for at the end of the reporting period. Complicating this case, the Government had refused to acknowledge it was holding the group of 27 for 15 months. Only in March 2007 did it claim it had "found" the 21 girls from the group. The Government released the girls into the custody of extended family members but did not allow the presence of international observers at the release ceremony. Many of the girls have reportedly returned to Thailand. The Government still has not accounted for the five males and one female.

In previous reporting periods, local and district officials in Xiang Kho District of Houaphan Province reportedly pressured local Protestants to renounce their Christian beliefs or be expelled from their villages. Officials in the villages of Kha and Porhai in Houaphan Province also pressured local Hmong families not to follow Christianity. There were no reports of arrests or other actions against Christians in these villages during the reporting period; however, Christians in other areas of Houaphan, including Sam Neua District, remained concerned that local officials were prone to blame any security incidents on the Hmong Christian community.

Forced Religious Conversion

During the reporting period, local officials in some areas attempted to force Protestants to renounce their faith; however, there were no reports of successful 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

The Government's record of respect for religious freedom, particularly in regard to Protestant minorities, continued to be marred by problems at the local level, with incidents of persecution occurring in many provinces. However, some positive steps were taken during the reporting period to address specific religious freedom concerns.

In its official pronouncements in recent years, the Government called for conciliation and equality among religious groups. The LFNC continued to instruct local officials on religious tolerance and often sought to intervene in cases where minority religious practitioners, particularly Christians, had been harassed or mistreated.

In May 2007 the LFNC's director of religious affairs held a country-wide seminar that included attendance by 95 Vientiane and provincial-level representatives of all four approved religions to review religious rights granted under the Constitution and in the law and to discuss resolving religious and ethnic issues.

In July 2007 the LFNC held a second meeting for religious leaders and officials from Vientiane Municipality and Vientiane Province, including from the provincial, district, and local levels. Those attending were to take back lessons learned to be applied locally. The Vice President of the LFNC was preparing to travel to southern areas in June 2008 to evaluate organizing a similar religious conference in Sekong and Attapeu provinces in July 2008. Officials from the LFNC also traveled with representatives of the LEC to several provinces to promote better understanding between LEC congregations and local officials during the reporting period.

In June 2008 senior government and LFNC officials participated in a major conference on "Religion and the Rule of Law" in Beijing, which examined key issues relating to freedom of religion.

The LEC continued to conduct an active program of public service during this reporting period, providing developmental assistance and organizing social welfare projects in several areas that had previously experienced religious intolerance. In conjunction with the LFNC, the LEC continued to conduct meetings with officials and Protestants in some villages where there had been religious tensions. Senior LEC leaders increased their contacts with the international religious community as the LEC became a full member of the World Council of Churches in 2008.

In May 2007 the LEC opened a Sports and Vocational Training Center in Vientiane Municipality on restituted

property that had been confiscated by the Government several years earlier. The land was returned to the LEC contingent on the Center being made available for use by athletes to prepare for the 2009 South East Asian Games. The LEC received recognition from the Prime Minister for its support and is seeking to expand its training into new areas such as computer, agriculture, and English language training to support the Prime Minister's "focus on youth" programs.

Four Catholic priests ordained in 2006 took up their new duties during 2007. On December 29, 2007, the Catholic Church was allowed to ordain an additional priest at Paksane District, Bolikhamsai Province. Approval for these ordinations represented significant improvements from past restrictions.

The Government also permitted the Bishop of Luang Prabang, who serves from Vientiane, to visit the north more frequently to conduct services for the scattered Catholic communities in Luang Prabang, Sayaboury, Bokeo, and Luang Namtha, but it continued to restrict his travel and deny him residence in Luang Prabang.

In May 2008 one property in northern Vientiane Province, originally owned by Government but approved for Baha'i use, was officially deeded to the Baha'i. The Baha'i's request for the deed was supported by the LFNC.

Baha'i local spiritual assemblies and the National Spiritual Assembly routinely held Baha'i 19-day feasts and celebrated all holy days without interference. The Baha'i National Spiritual Assembly in Vientiane met regularly and has sent delegations to the Universal House of Justice in Mount Carmel, in Haifa, Israel.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The various religious communities generally coexist amicably. Society places importance on harmonious relations, and the dominant Buddhist faith generally is tolerant of other religious practices. There has been no ecumenical movement to date. Local cultural mores generally instilled respect for longstanding, well-known differences in belief. However, interreligious tensions arose on rare occasions within some minority ethnic groups, particularly in response to proselytizing or disagreements over rights to village resources. Efforts of some congregations to establish churches independent of the LEC or associated with denominations based abroad led to some tensions within the Protestant community. Frictions also have arisen over the refusal of some members of minority religious groups, particularly Protestants, to participate in Buddhist or animist religious ceremonies.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Religious freedom is a key priority of the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane. Embassy officers regularly discussed religious freedom with a range of Lao Government officials.

The Embassy maintained an ongoing dialogue with the Religious Affairs Department of the LFNC. The Embassy informed the LFNC of specific cases of arrest or harassment. The LFNC in turn used this information to intercede with local officials. Embassy representatives met with a range of leaders of all religious groups in the country during the period covered by this report. Embassy officials actively encouraged religious freedom despite an environment restricted by government-owned and -controlled media.

The Embassy actively encouraged high-level visits as the most effective tool for eliciting greater respect for religious freedom from the Government. The Embassy also regularly posted on its website material relevant to religious freedom in the country. The Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs visited the country during the reporting period and encouraged greater religious freedom while meeting with senior government officials.

Released on September 19, 2008

[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)



Published by the U.S. Department of State Website at <http://www.state.gov> maintained by the Bureau of Public Affairs.