



Cambodia

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. Buddhism is the state religion.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues 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 its population was approximately 13.8 million. An estimated 93 percent of the population was Hinayana, or Theravada, Buddhist. The Hinayana Buddhist tradition was widespread and strong in all provinces, with an estimated 4,100 pagodas found throughout the country. Since the vast majority of ethnic Khmer Cambodians were Buddhist, 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 branch of Buddhism is practiced by approximately 150,000 followers and had 63 temples throughout the country.

There were approximately 500,000 to 700,000 Muslims (an estimated 4 percent to 8 percent of the population), predominantly ethnic Chams, who generally were found in towns and rural fishing villages on the banks of the Tonle Sap and Mekong rivers and in Kampot Province. There were four branches of Islam represented: the Malay-influenced Shafi branch, practiced by 88 percent of Cham Muslims; the Saudi-Kuwaiti-influenced Salafi (sometimes called "Wahhabi") branch, which claims 6 percent of the Muslim population; the traditional Iman-San branch, practiced by 3 percent; and the Kadiani branch, which also contributed 3 percent. There were 200 to 300 mosques of the 4 main branches and 200 to 300 small Surav mosques, which had congregations of up to 40 persons and did not have a min-bar from which Friday sermons are given. The small, although growing, Christian community constituted approximately 2 percent of the population. There were an estimated 100 Christian organizations or denominations that operated freely throughout the country and include approximately 2,400 churches. However, only 900 of these churches were officially registered. Other religious organizations with small followings included the Vietnamese Cao Dai religion and the Baha'i Faith, each with an estimated 2,000 practicing members.

Foreign missionary groups, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and Jehovah's Witnesses, operated freely. They faced no barriers, except for a ban on door-to-door proselytizing during the daily lunch hours of noon to 2:00 p.m.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government does not tolerate abuse of religious freedom, either by governmental or private actors. However, Buddhism is the state religion. The Government promotes national 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 constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion.

The law requires all religious groups, including Buddhist ones, 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. However, there is no penalty for failing to register, and in practice some groups do not.

In April 2005 an Islamic conference, which drew approximately twenty-thousand Muslims from throughout the country and from other countries, was held in Kampong Cham Province without obtaining permission from the Ministry of Cults and Religious Affairs. Organizers obtained permission only from the district level for the conference. Local and national authorities did not interfere with or sanction the organizers. Religious groups have not encountered significant difficulties in obtaining approval for construction of places of worship. No significant constraints on religious assembly were reported during the period covered by this report.

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 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 religions.

Government officials continued to organize annual meetings for representatives of all religious groups to discuss religious developments and to address issues of concern.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. Foreign missionary groups generally operated freely throughout the country and did not encounter significant difficulties in performing their work. Government officials expressed appreciation for the work of many foreign religious groups in providing much needed assistance in education, rural development, and training. However, officials also expressed some concern that foreign groups used the guise of religion to become involved in illegal or political affairs. During the reporting period, the Government did not close any Islamic schools (madrasas) as it had in the past. On December 29, 2004, a court convicted three persons connected with the school of assisting in a planned terrorist attack on the embassy of a Western country.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees 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.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

Minority religious groups experienced little or no societal discrimination during the period covered by this report; however, Muslims and Christians reported a few minor conflicts.

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 also expressed concern about the Cham Muslim community receiving financial assistance from foreign countries. However, in general, Cham Muslims were well integrated into society, enjoyed positions of prominence 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 often are supported by funding from foreign public or private groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues 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 the Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian faiths. In 2005 the embassy expanded its Muslim outreach program, which provides for additional channels of information on the status of religious freedom in the country among the Muslim population while also providing material assistance. Through this program, the U.S. government gave assistance to four Islamic organizations that actively conducted human rights and democracy training in Phnom Penh, and the provinces of Kampong Chhnang, Pursat, Battambang, Kampot, Siem Riep, Kratie, and Kampong Cham to increase awareness of human rights within the Muslim community. In 2005 the embassy continued to provide financial support to an additional Muslim group for the Cham Muslim radio hour. The embassy's outreach program distributed Khmer-language versions of the booklet "Muslim Life in America" throughout ten provinces around the country, particularly during the embassy's Ramadan outreach programs and representation events.

Similarly, the embassy has worked to maintain close contacts with the Buddhist religious community through visits to wats and pagodas. The highest profile visit of 2005 occurred in December when the ambassador and nearly 200 embassy personnel visited Phnom Penh's most venerated Buddhist shrine, Wat Phnom, located adjacent to the new embassy compound. Additionally, two Buddhist organizations received U.S. government grants to support their human rights and cultural preservation activities. The first grant went to the Khmer Buddhist Society in Cambodia (KBSC) to fund a series of workshops entitled "Buddhist Response to Community Dispute Resolution" in Preah Vihear Province. The second went to the Buddhist Institute to support the preservation of thirty oral folktales collected from elderly Buddhists throughout the country. These projects afforded embassy officers the opportunity to meet with Buddhist religious figures on numerous occasions and assess the operating environment for the dominant religion in the country.

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