

THAILAND 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. There were reports the government favored certain groups and committed abuses including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, and torture in the three Malay-Muslim majority southern provinces.

There were reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. In the southernmost border provinces, continued separatist violence, including killings, contributed to tense relations between ethnic Thai Buddhist and ethnic Malay Muslim communities and undermined citizens' abilities to perform the full range of their religious activities in a number of cases.

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with the government, visited religious leaders, hosted interreligious events, and promoted educational exchanges with the United States that supported religious freedom and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 67.5 million (July 2013 estimate). According to the 2010 census, the population is 93 percent Buddhist and 5 percent Muslim. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), academics, and religious groups state that 85 to 95 percent of the population is Theravada Buddhist and 5 to 10 percent Muslim. Groups that constitute less than 5 percent of the population include animist, Christian, Confucian, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh, and Taoist populations.

Most Buddhists also incorporate Brahmin-Hindu and animist practices. The Buddhist clergy (sangha) consists of two main schools, Mahanikaya and Dhammayuttika. The former is older and more prevalent within the monastic community than the latter. The same religious hierarchy governs both groups.

Islam is the dominant religion in four of the five southernmost provinces. The majority of Muslims in those provinces are ethnic Malay, but the Muslim population nationally also includes descendants of immigrants from South Asia, China, Cambodia, Indonesia, and those who consider themselves ethnic Thai. Statistics provided by the Religious Affairs Department (RAD) of the Ministry of

THAILAND

Culture indicate that almost all Muslims are Sunnis. The majority of ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese practice Mahayana or Theravada Buddhism. Many ethnic Chinese, as well as members of the Mien hill tribe, practice forms of Taoism.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom.

The constitution protects religious liberty and states that unjust discrimination against a person on the grounds of differences in religious belief shall not be permitted. There is no state religion. Theravada Buddhism, however, receives significant government support, and the constitution requires the monarch to be Buddhist. The constitution specifies the state shall “patronize and protect Buddhism as the religion observed by most Thais for a long period of time, as well as other religions, and shall also promote a good understanding and harmony among the followers of all religions as well as encourage the application of religious principles to create virtue and develop the quality of life.”

The constitution generally provides for freedom of religious speech; however, laws prohibiting speech likely to insult Buddhism and other religions remain in place. The law specifically prohibits the defamation or insult of Buddhism and Buddhist clergy. Violators can face up to one year’s imprisonment, fines of up to 20,000 baht (\$611), or both. The penal code prohibits the insult or disturbance of religious places or services of all officially recognized religious groups. Penalties range from imprisonment of one to seven years, a fine of 2,000 to 14,000 baht (\$61 to \$428), or both.

There are five officially recognized religious groups: Buddhists, Muslims, Brahmin-Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians. The RAD is responsible for registering religious groups. Under provisions of regulations on religious organizations, the RAD recognizes a new religious organization if a national census shows it has at least 5,000 adherents, has a uniquely recognizable theology, and is not politically active. A religious organization also must be accepted into at least one of the five existing recognized religious groups before the RAD will grant registration. Generally, the government requires that new groups receive acceptance from existing groups with similar belief systems. Government registration confers some benefits, including access to state subsidies, tax exempt status, and preferential allocation of resident visas for the organization’s officials. Since 1984, however,

THAILAND

the government has not recognized any new religious groups. In practice unregistered religious groups operate freely, and the government's practice of not recognizing any new religious groups does not restrict their activities.

The law requires religious education for all students at both the primary and secondary levels. Lessons contain information about all of the recognized religious groups in the country. Students who wish to pursue in-depth studies of a particular religion may study at a religious school and can transfer credits to the public school. Individual schools, working in conjunction with their local administrative boards, are authorized to arrange additional religious studies courses. The Supreme Sangha Council and the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand create special curricula for Buddhist and Islamic studies in public schools.

There are four possibilities for obtaining Islamic education in the southern part of the country: government-subsidized schools offering Islamic education with the national curriculum; private Islamic schools that sometimes offer non-quranic subjects such as foreign languages (Arabic and English), but whose curriculum may not be approved by the government; traditional *pondoks*, or private Islamic day schools, offering Islamic education according to their own curriculum to students of all ages; and *tadika*, an after-school religious course for children in grades one through six, often held in a mosque.

Government Practices

Human rights groups accused government forces and pro-government death squads of extrajudicial killings of Muslim individuals suspected of involvement with separatists. According to a well-known NGO, government forces had conducted 30 extrajudicial killings in the three southernmost provinces as of September. The government continued to arrest suspected militants, some of them juveniles, and in some cases held them for a month or more under an emergency decree and martial law provisions. Human rights organizations maintained the arrests were arbitrary, excessive, and needlessly lengthy, and continued to criticize detention facility overcrowding. Civil society groups accused the army of torturing some suspected militants at detention facilities.

In areas of the southern provinces where violence occurred, the government continued to provide armed escorts for Buddhist monks for their daily rounds to receive alms and during Buddhist festivals. Government troops also continued to station themselves within Buddhist temples, which some NGOs and ethnic Malay

THAILAND

Muslims perceived as a militarization of Buddhist temples. Other NGOs viewed the military presence as a response to the prior attacks on Buddhist temples. Some temples declined to accept military protection, saying that they wished to avoid the possibility that militants would target them because of the military presence. The temples also cited the likely costs of military protection, including higher utility bills and the effort to control behavior on temple grounds. Many temples instead relied on Buddhist volunteers for security.

Amid frequent bombings, other types of attacks by suspected insurgents and government security operations in response, tensions between the local ethnic Malay Muslim and ethnic Thai Buddhist communities remained high. The emergency decree in effect in the majority Muslim southern area gave military, police, and civilian authorities significant powers to restrict certain basic rights and delegated certain internal security powers to the armed forces.

Muslim professors and clerics, particularly in the southernmost provinces, faced additional scrutiny because of continuing government concern about Malay Muslim separatist activities. Government officials and journalists said some Islamic schools indoctrinated youth into supporting the conflict. Academics at a deep-South university concluded that southern insurgents targeted state schools and teachers in response to a perceived effort to impose Thai Buddhist culture on the region.

The Ministry of Interior (MOI) continued to deny the request of Falun Gong representatives to register officially as a foundation or association. Falun Gong leaders petitioned the Administrative Court to reverse the denial, but the court concurred with the MOI. The ruling was appealed to the Supreme Administrative Court and remained pending at year's end.

In accordance with constitutional requirements, the government subsidized activities of the five recognized religious communities. The government allocated 4.8 billion baht (\$146.6 million) for the fiscal year to support the National Buddhism Bureau, an independent state agency. The bureau oversaw the Buddhist clergy and approved the curricula for all Buddhist temples and educational institutions. In addition, the bureau sponsored educational and public relations materials on Buddhism as it relates to daily life. The government budgeted 411 million baht (\$12.6 million) for the RAD, including 61.5 million baht (\$1.9 million) for Buddhist organizations; 8 million baht (\$244,349) for Islamic organizations; and 2.2 million baht (\$67,196) for Christian, Brahmin-Hindu, and Sikh organizations. The RAD fiscal year budget also allocated 64.2 million baht

THAILAND

(\$2 million) for religious lectures, 96 million baht (\$3 million) for Buddhist Sunday school, 12 million baht (\$366,524) for Islamic study centers, 7.5 million baht (\$229,076) for religious activities for persons with disabilities, and 8 million baht (\$244,349) for interfaith events. Pursuant to law, the government budgeted 16.1 million baht (\$491,753), the same as the previous year, to promote and facilitate Muslim participation in the Hajj.

The budgets for Buddhist and Islamic organizations included funds to support Buddhist and Islamic institutes of higher education, to fund religious education programs in public and private schools, to provide daily allowances for monks and Muslim clerics who hold administrative and senior religious posts, and to subsidize travel and health care for monks and Muslim clerics. The budgets also included funding for the renovation and repair of temples and mosques, the maintenance of historic Buddhist sites, and the daily upkeep of the central mosque in Pattani. The National Buddhism Bureau allocated 978 million baht (\$30 million), a three-fold increase from the previous year, for the maintenance of Buddhist temples and institutions.

The RAD budgeted 20 million baht (\$610,874) for the restoration of religious buildings of non-Buddhist, non-Muslim religious groups, which were able to request government support for renovation and repair work but did not receive a regular budget to maintain religious buildings, nor government assistance to support their clergy. The RAD budget for the maintenance of religious buildings for these groups remained unchanged from the previous year.

Private donations to registered religious organizations remained tax deductible.

Religious groups generally proselytized freely. Monks working as Buddhist missionaries were active, particularly in border areas among the country's tribal populations. According to the National Buddhism Bureau, there were 4,746 Buddhist missionaries working nationwide.

Muslim and Christian missionaries did not receive public funds or state subsidies. Islamic organizations had small numbers of citizens working as missionaries in the country. Christian organizations had much larger numbers of missionaries, both foreign and Thai, across all denominations operating in the country. Sikhs and Hindu-Brahmins had smaller numbers of missionaries.

There were close to 1,600 registered foreign missionaries, mostly Christian. Some missionaries were present in accordance with formal quotas set along religious and

THAILAND

denominational lines, while many unregistered missionaries also lived and worked in the country without government interference. Registration conferred some benefits, such as visas with longer validity, but being unregistered was not a significant barrier to foreign missionary activity. Many foreign missionaries entered the country using tourist visas and proselytized without RAD's authorization. There were no reports that the government deported or harassed foreign missionaries for working without registration.

The government recognized 39 elected Provincial Islamic Committees nationwide. Their responsibilities included providing advice to provincial governors on Islamic issues; deciding on the establishment, relocation, merger, and dissolution of mosques; appointing persons to serve as imams; and issuing announcements and approvals of Islamic religious activities, among others.

In accordance with the constitution, the government sponsored interfaith dialogue through regular meetings and public education programs. The RAD carried out and oversaw many of these efforts. On August 13, the RAD held its annual interfaith assembly in Bangkok, and approximately 1,500 people participated, including representatives from each registered religious group. The RAD also conducted an annual interfaith caravan in January to Loei Province, which brought blankets, clothes, and other necessary items to people in need. The RAD, in conjunction with provincial authorities, sponsored Youth Reconciliation Camps in 62 provinces throughout the country aimed at creating and strengthening mutual religious understanding.

Muslim community members and the RAD Sheikhu'l Islam Office of the Supreme Islamic Cleric of Thailand stated that the drama *Fa Chrot Sai (Heaven Reaching Earth)*, which appeared in August on the armed forces-owned television Channel 7, insulted Islam. They stated that the drama, which includes a romance between a Muslim man and a non-Muslim woman, damaged and distorted Islamic principles. Channel 7 and the production company apologized and pledged to change the program's content.

The Royal Thai Police in August changed its policy and allowed female Muslim police officers to wear head scarves as a part of their police uniform, in response to a petition by the Pattani Provincial Islamic Committee and the Sheikhu'l Islam Office. Police officials estimated there were approximately 100 female Muslim police officers, of whom 60 intended to wear head scarves.

THAILAND

Wat Nong Chok Secondary School, a public institution in Bangkok, continued to prohibit female students from wearing headscarves at school, despite interventions by the Ministry of Education, other governmental agencies, and NGOs. On February 28, a court dismissed a 2011 lawsuit filed by a female Muslim student who sought to overturn the ban.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Ethnicity and religion are often inextricably linked; for this reason it is difficult to categorize many incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance. In the South, violence between ethnic Malay Muslims and ethnic Thai Buddhists undermined the ability of individuals to practice a full range of religious activities.

Insurgents continued high-profile attacks throughout the year, including 86 incidents during Ramadan that resulted in the deaths of 29 people and injuries to 105 more. On July 11, a 50 kilogram (110 pound) bomb explosion injured eight soldiers in a protection unit providing security for teachers traveling between their homes and workplaces in Yala Province. Unknown persons shot and killed a Muslim couple in Pattani Province on July 20. The husband was a former sub-district headman. Unknown assailants shot and killed a Buddhist couple while they rode a motorcycle on July 21, in Narathiwat Province. Two days later, gunmen fatally shot another Buddhist couple on a motorcycle in the presence of their four-year-old son. A July 24 bombing of a teacher protection unit in Narathiwat killed two teachers and wounded two police officers and a teacher. On August 2, a bombing of a teacher protection unit in Narathiwat Province killed two Army Rangers and wounded three others.

At least two imams were killed and one injured in three attacks. Unknown assailants shot and wounded an imam and his son on March 30, in Pattani. Two gunmen shot and killed a former imam and wounded his wife during an attack on their home in Pattani on June 25. On August 5, four men on two motorcycles shot and killed Imam Yakop Raimanee, from the Central Mosque of Pattani, in front of a crowd at a market.

On September 28, a group of Muslim youths assaulted a Buddhist monk while he collected alms in Yala Province. Five suspects later surrendered to the police and confessed that they assaulted the monk.

THAILAND

As in previous years, Buddhist monks reported they were fearful and felt they could no longer travel freely through southern communities to receive alms or perform rites. As a safety precaution, they often conducted in the afternoon religious rites customarily performed in the evening.

Unlike the previous year, there were no reports of intimidation and violence against peaceful Falun Gong protesters.

Although there were no reports of anti-Semitic incidents, Nazi symbols and figures were sometimes displayed on merchandise and used in advertising. In July students at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University created and prominently displayed a large mural with Adolf Hitler appearing alongside comic book superheroes such as Superman and Batman. The school issued a statement apologizing for the incident and removed the mural from campus.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officers and high-level visitors from the Department of State discussed religious freedom with the government. Embassy officers regularly visited Muslim and Buddhist religious leaders, academics, and elected officials as part of the embassy's effort to monitor the complex ethnic and religious issues at play in society.

Embassy-hosted iftars provided the opportunity to share information about Muslim life in the United States and highlight the importance of religious freedom. Embassy cultural programs frequently included Muslim youth as participations, such as a one-year high school exchange program focused on Muslim students. The embassy also regularly engaged with media outlets associated with minority groups and reached out to hill tribes and Muslim communities throughout the country.

Officers from the Consulate General in Chiang Mai participated in several religious events organized by the community and local officials.