

THAILAND 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The military government that seized power by coup on May 22 repealed the constitution (except for provisions related to the monarchy) and promulgated an interim constitution that lacks guarantees of religious liberty or protection from discrimination based upon religion, as the prior constitution provided.

In the country's three Malay Muslim majority southern provinces, attacks by suspected Malay Muslim insurgents and the response by government security forces contributed to continued tensions between the local ethnic Malay Muslim and Thai Buddhist communities. According to human rights and civil society reports, these tensions undermined the ability of individuals to practice a full range of religious activities. Attacks by insurgents and criminal elements resulted in hundreds of deaths and injuries, including religious leaders and teachers. Human rights and civil society groups said the government's response has included torturing some suspected Muslim militants and arrests that were arbitrary, excessive, and needlessly lengthy.

Violence has increased the divide between the Muslim and Buddhist communities, the latter of which continues to slowly relocate outside the southern region.

U.S. embassy officers and high-level visitors from the Department of State discussed religious freedom with the government. The embassy co-sponsored initiatives to increase interfaith dialogue in the South among Muslim and Buddhist youth, including delivering sports-based peace education to young people of different religious backgrounds.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 67.7 million (July 2014 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 together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include animist, Christian, Confucian, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh, and Taoist populations.

THAILAND

Most Buddhists also incorporate 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 Culture indicate that almost all Muslims are Sunnis. The majority of ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese practice either 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 Framework

Prior to the May 22 coup, the constitution provided for religious liberty and stated unjust discrimination against a person on the grounds of differences in religious belief was not permitted. The coup leaders suspended the constitution and promulgated an interim constitution on July 22 that states: “The human dignity, rights, liberty, and equality of the people shall be protected.” The document, however, grants the military government power to limit or suppress fundamental human rights protections and does not specifically mention either religious liberty or protection from discrimination based upon religion. The interim constitution prohibits Buddhist priests, novices, monks, or members of the clergy from serving in the interim government’s National Legislative Assembly.

There is no state religion. Current law, however, 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 (\$608), 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 for one to seven years, a fine of 2,000 to 14,000 baht (\$61 to \$425), or both.

Under the law, the RAD is responsible for registering religious groups. There are five officially recognized religious groups: Buddhists, Muslims, Brahmin-Hindus,

THAILAND

Sikhs, and Christians. 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. The government requires that new groups be accepted by existing groups with similar belief systems. Registration confers some benefits, including access to state subsidies, tax exempt status, and preferential allocation of resident visas for the registered organization's officials. Since 1984, however, the government has not recognized any new religious groups. Despite the lack of formal legal recognition, unregistered religious groups report operating freely, and the government's practice of not recognizing new religious groups did not restrict their activities.

The law requires religious education for all students at both the primary and secondary levels; students cannot opt out. 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 required 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

The emergency decree in effect in the majority Muslim southern area gave military, police, and civilian authorities significant powers to restrict certain basic rights, including pre-trial detention and searches without warrant, which they used frequently, and delegated certain internal security powers to the armed forces,

THAILAND

often triggering accusations of unfair treatment. The government continued to arrest suspected Malay Muslim 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. Civil society groups accused the army of torturing some suspected Malay Muslim militants at detention facilities. For example, representatives of a local NGO faced possible legal action for defamation after they publicly called for an investigation into allegations that irregular military units had tortured a suspected militant in April. Military and police officials denied the accusations.

Due to concerns about violence, the government continued to provide armed escorts for Buddhist monks for their daily rounds to receive alms and during Buddhist festivals.

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 stated that some Islamic schools indoctrinated youth into supporting the conflict. Academics at a regional 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' appeal of the Administrative Court's 2013 ruling to uphold the MOI's denial remained pending at year's end. Falun Gong representatives reported that authorities harassed group members in Pattaya and Bangkok. In early August police officials dispersed a group of Falun Gong members while they distributed leaflets at a pier in Pattaya. Authorities confiscated the leaflets and other possessions, but later returned them after group members paid a fine. Falun Gong leaders said that authorities also prevented adherents from distributing materials in front of the Grand Palace in Bangkok.

The government subsidized activities of the five recognized religious communities. The government allocated 5.4 billion baht (\$164 million) for the fiscal year (October 1-September 30) 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

THAILAND

bureau sponsored educational and public relations materials on Buddhism and daily life. The government budgeted 401 million baht (\$12.2 million) for the RAD, including 61.5 million baht (\$1.9 million) for Buddhist organizations; 8 million baht (\$243,000) for Islamic organizations; and 2.2 million baht (\$67,000) for Christian, Brahmin-Hindu, and Sikh organizations. The RAD fiscal year budget also included allocations for religious lectures, Buddhist Sunday school, Islamic study centers, religious activities for persons with disabilities, and interfaith events. The government provided funds to promote and facilitate Muslim participation in the Hajj.

The government funded Buddhist and Islamic institutes of higher education, religious education programs in public and private schools, renovation and repair of temples and mosques, and daily allowances for travel and health care for monks and Muslim clerics.

The RAD provided funds for the restoration of religious buildings of non-Buddhist, non-Muslim religious groups. These groups did not receive a regular budget to maintain religious buildings, nor government assistance to support their clergy.

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 5,011 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 larger numbers of missionaries, both foreign and Thai, across all denominations operating in the country. Sikhs and Hindus 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 denominational lines. Many unregistered missionaries, however, 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

THAILAND

entered the country using tourist visas and proselytized without RAD's authorization. There were no reports that the government deported or harassed foreign missionaries 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.

The government sponsored interfaith dialogue through regular meetings and public education programs. The RAD carried out and oversaw many of these efforts including a central interfaith youth camp, regional interfaith youth camps in 30 provinces, and, in conjunction with provincial authorities, Youth Reconciliation Camps in 62 provinces to foster mutual religious understanding. The RAD sponsored an annual interfaith assembly and interfaith caravan to Loei Province, which brought blankets, clothes, and other necessary items to people in need.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. In the South, violence between ethnic Malay Muslims and ethnic Thai Buddhists hindered the ability of individuals to practice a full range of religious activities. Malay Muslim insurgents continued attacks. According to statistics from the NGO Deep South Watch, violence (including common crime) resulted in 320 individuals – including predominantly civilians along with security service personnel and insurgents – killed and 644 injured in 755 incidents as of December. At least one imam was killed and one injured in attacks, and two Buddhist monks were killed. Teacher protection units – military personnel escorting local educators – were targeted in at least 25 separate attacks, and six Buddhist teachers were killed. (Insurgents reportedly often considered teachers, along with their military escorts, to be targets affiliated with the state.) Attackers set the corpses of one monk and one Buddhist teacher on fire. According to human rights and civil society groups, a decade of constant violence has increased isolation between the Muslim and Buddhist communities, the latter of which is slowly relocating outside the region.

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

THAILAND

perform rites. As a safety precaution, they often conducted evening religious rites in the afternoon.

Although there were no reports of anti-Semitic events, Nazi symbols and figures were sometimes displayed on merchandise and used in advertising.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officers discussed religious freedom with the government, including the importance of mutual respect and parity of rights for Thailand's religious minorities. Embassy officers regularly visited Muslim and Buddhist religious leaders, academics, and elected officials as part of the embassy's effort to monitor complex ethnic and religious issues 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. Events included Muslims as well as non-Muslims. Embassy cultural programs frequently included Muslim youth as participants, such as a one-year high school exchange program focused on Muslim students. After their return, the embassy engaged program alumni in follow-on activities. Alumni frequently mentioned religious tolerance and religious freedom in the United States as a revealing and rewarding aspect of their stay. The embassy also regularly engaged with media outlets associated with minority religious groups, and reached out to hill tribes and Muslim communities throughout the country with messages supporting religious freedom.

The embassy sponsored two initiatives to increase interfaith dialogue in the southern region. One initiative supported dialogue among Muslim and Buddhist youth and enabled them to work jointly on community projects and to network with their peers in the Philippines and Indonesia. Another program delivered sports-based peace education to youth of different religious backgrounds. The embassy included individuals representing Buddhist and Muslim faiths as participants with other regional young leaders in a U.S.-based program exploring U.S. history, society, and institutions within the context of religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue.

The embassy aired a video for "The International Day of Tolerance" on November 16 that highlighted diverse ethnicities and religions at the embassy and showcased the commitment of the United States to tolerance.

THAILAND

The embassy also supported civil society groups throughout the country on issues of local governance, including assistance for religious, youth, women, and media groups in the South.