

# **CAMBODIA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution states that Buddhism is the state religion and is promoted by the government through holiday observances, religious training, Buddhist instruction in public school, and financial support to Buddhist institutions. The law provides for freedom of belief and religious worship, provided such freedom neither interferes with others' beliefs and religions nor violates public order and security. There were reports that the government disrupted gatherings of Christian worshipers and arrested several of them under the suspicion they were holding political rallies. There was also criticism from Muslims about the government's closure of a Muslim Cham radio program without any clear reason.

Approximately 150 Vietnamese Montagnard Christian refugees reported being interrogated by Vietnamese police in Phnom Penh, drawing questions from activists as to why foreign police were allowed to question refugees. In December the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) escorted 13 of the Montagnards back to their villages in Vietnam.

There were some reports of barriers to the complete integration of the predominantly Muslim Cham people. A Cham man was killed for being suspected of practicing black magic.

U.S. embassy officials discussed the issue of the Montagnard Christians with the government. Embassy officials also discussed the importance of religious acceptance and diversity with government representatives, civil society organizations, and leaders of Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim groups. The embassy promoted themes of religious tolerance and understanding through a speakers' series and other forms of engagement.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 16.0 million (July 2016 estimate). The 2013 Inter-censal Population Survey conducted by the National Institute of Statistics said Buddhists make up 97.9 percent of the population, and an estimated 95 percent of the population is Theravada Buddhist, according to the Ministry of Cults and Religions (MCR). The vast majority of ethnic Khmer Cambodians are Buddhist. Ethnic Vietnamese who reside in the country traditionally practice Mahayana Buddhism although there are many who have adopted Theravada Buddhism. Other ethnic Vietnamese practice Roman

Catholicism, and they make up the vast majority of Catholics in the country. Ethnic Vietnamese make up approximately 5 percent of the population. According to government estimates, approximately 2.6 percent of the population is Muslim, although some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) estimate the Muslim population to be 4 to 5 percent. The Muslim population is predominantly ethnic Cham, although not all Cham are Muslim. The Cham typically live in towns and rural fishing villages on the banks of the Tonle Sap Lake and the Mekong River, as well as in Kampot Province. There are four branches of Islam represented in the country: the Shafi'i branch, practiced by as many as 90 percent of Muslims in the country; the Salafi (Wahhabi) branch; the indigenous Iman-San branch; and the Kadiani branch. The remainder of the population includes Bahais, Jews, ethnic Vietnamese Cao Dai, and members of various Christian denominations.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for freedom of belief and religious worship, provided such freedom neither interferes with others' beliefs and religions nor violates public order and security. The constitution establishes Buddhism as the state religion and provides for state support of Buddhist education; it also prohibits discrimination based on religion. The law requires that religious groups refrain from openly criticizing other religious groups, although this provision is rarely tested. The law also forbids religious organizations from organizing events, rallies, meetings, and training sessions that are politically focused.

The law requires all religious groups, including Buddhist groups, to register with the MCR to conduct religious activities. The law mandates that groups must inform the government of the goals of their religious organization, describe its activities, provide biographical information of all religious leaders, describe funding sources, commit to submitting annual reports detailing all activities, and refrain from insulting other religious groups, fomenting disputes, or undermining national security. Registration requires approvals from numerous local, provincial, and national government offices, a process which can take up to 90 days. The MCR, however, has no authority to punish religious groups for failing to register, and there are no associated penalties for failing to register. Registered religious groups receive an income tax exemption from the Ministry of Economy and Finance.

While the law formally bans non-Buddhist groups from door-to-door proselytizing and stipulates that non-Buddhist literature may only be distributed inside religious institutions, the MCR reports some Christian groups still carry out these activities without facing arrest. The law also prohibits offers of money or materials in order to convince people to convert.

The law requires separate registration of all places of worship and religious schools. Unregistered places of worship and religious schools may be shut down temporarily until they are registered, although the MCR reports it has not taken such action. The law also makes a legal distinction between “places of worship” and “offices of prayer.” The establishment of a place of worship requires that the founders own the structure and the land on which it is located. The facility must have a minimum capacity of 200 persons, and the permit application requires the support of at least 100 congregants. By contrast, an office of prayer may be located in a rented property and has no minimum capacity requirement. The permit application for an office of prayer requires the support of at least 25 congregants. Places of worship must be located at least two kilometers (1.2 miles) from each other and may not be used for political purposes or to house criminals or fugitives. The distance requirement applies only to the construction of new places of worship and not to offices of religious organizations or offices of prayer.

Religious schools must be registered with the MCR and the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MOEYS). Religious schools are advised to follow the MOEYS core curriculum which does not include a religious component; however, schools may supplement lessons with a religious curriculum in addition to the ministry-core curriculum. The government promotes Buddhist religious instruction in public schools in coordination with MOEYS, although non-Buddhist students were allowed to opt out of this instruction. The law does not mandate non-Buddhist religious instruction, and no other religions are taught in public schools. Non-Buddhist religious instruction may, however, be provided by private institutions.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

In early June the government closed Radio Sap Cham, a daily hour-long radio program broadcasting since 2004 on issues related to the preservation of Cham identity, language, religion, and culture. It was the only Cham-language radio

program in the country and the closure drew criticism from the Cham community on social media. The government did not elaborate on the reasons for shutting down the program.

In June the Ratanakiri provincial government dispersed a group of approximately 50 ethnic minority Jarai Christians who had gathered for a Bible study session, saying they had not obtained proper permission from the local authorities. Later that month, provincial police briefly detained three ethnic Jarai and ordered them to delete photographs of prayer meetings stored on their personal electronic devices. Local media reported that authorities broke up the gatherings because of fears the group was focusing on political issues.

In September the National Election Committee released a statement reaffirming the rights of Muslims to wear religious headscarves or caps in voter registration photographs, marking a departure from previous restrictions against wearing headscarves and caps in photographs used for official identification documents.

The government continued to promote Buddhist holidays, provide Buddhist training and education to monks and others in pagodas, and provide financial support to an institute that performed research and published materials on Khmer culture and Buddhist traditions.

The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, also known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, continued to hear testimony related to charges of ethnic- and religious-based genocide against the Cham population during the Khmer Rouge era from 1975 to 1979.

According to *Radio Free Asia*, in June authorities allowed police from Vietnam to question a group of approximately 150 Vietnamese Montagnard Christian refugees in Phnom Penh. Activist groups and the representatives of the UNHCR said refugees should not be subject to interviews from police of the country they fled. According to media reports, the Montagnards expressed fear following the questioning that the Cambodian government would deport them back to Vietnam, which they reportedly fled because of religious and other reasons. In a statement to *Radio Free Asia*, government officials said they were unaware of the Vietnamese police visit; some of the Montagnards said, however, that the Vietnamese police were accompanied by local police. In October the Ministry of Interior announced that a majority of the remaining Montagnards had not been granted asylum following extensive interviews, stating “their answers do not comply with the convention on refugees.” Local media initially reported the

ministry provided them two weeks' notice to leave the country or face arrest and immediate deportation to Vietnam. In December the UNHCR escorted 13 of the Montagnards back to their villages in Vietnam. Because religion, ethnicity, and politics are closely linked, it was difficult to categorize the government's actions as being solely based on religious identity.

During Ramadan, Prime Minister Hun Sen hosted an iftar for members of the Muslim community. In his speech, he told his guests there was no basis for political discrimination in the country and called on Buddhist followers to be tolerant and accepting of the Muslim and Christian communities.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were reports from some members of the Cham Muslim community of barriers to full integration into society. Local media reported some members of the majority Buddhist community and other minority ethnic groups continued to view the Cham with suspicion and superstition as purported practitioners of "black magic." In some cases, those who were suspected of practicing black magic were killed by villagers or even their own family members. In April 62-year-old Soa Siv was beheaded by his daughter-in-law Mao Channy and her aunt Em Sun because they said he had killed Channy's father with black magic.

In January unidentified individuals sent death threats and attacked teachers and school officials of a Muslim school for young women in a predominantly Cham community in Tbong Khmum Province, resulting in the deployment of police to protect the premises. In one instance, a rock thrown over the wall was reportedly wrapped in a piece of paper written with death threats mentioning the school's founder and local Imam Muhammad Abdulrahman, as well as his son and the school's teachers, according to Commune Police Chief Seng Ly. In other incidents, Abdulrahman reported unknown individuals throwing firecrackers against dormitory walls as students slept and placing feces in the water tanks from which students drink.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

U.S. embassy officials raised religious freedom with MCR representatives and other government officials. Embassy officials also discussed the issue of deportation and residency of Montagnard Christians with government officials and members of international and local NGOs.

The embassy underscored the importance of acceptance of religious diversity with leaders of Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim groups, emphasizing the importance of interfaith tolerance in a democratic society. Embassy programs focused on faith-based communities and promoted pluralism through exchanges and youth programs.

The embassy continued several programs specifically focusing on the Cham population. One of the programs sought to help preserve Cham heritage, including religious heritage, through reading and writing instruction in the native Cham language, and included the preservation and study of religious artifacts from the ancient Kingdom of Champa from which present-day Cham trace their lineage. Another program consisted of a series of speaking engagements and focus groups in which Islamic leaders from around the world engaged with the Cham community to provide the Cham with a deeper understanding of the constructive role that various Muslim populations play throughout the world in their workforces and communities.

Other embassy programs invited Muslims to participate in workshops with guest speakers from throughout Southeast Asia. The workshops focused on interfaith cooperation, community leadership, and conflict resolution. Embassy officials toured the country on several occasions to meet members of the community, in the process promoting religious tolerance, showing respect for Cham culture, lessening the isolation of the Cham, and supporting Cham integration into the wider culture. They discussed ways the Cham could further integrate into society while preserving their cultural and religious identity, and lay the groundwork for genuine, long-lasting religious tolerance.