

LAOS 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides citizens with “the right and freedom to believe or not to believe in religion.” The government officially recognizes four religious umbrella groups – Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahai Faith – and generally requires other religious groups to affiliate with one of these four groups to operate legally. A decree issued in 2016 with the stated intent of clarifying rules for religious practice extends registration requirements to Buddhist groups, which had previously enjoyed a de facto exemption, and defines the government’s role as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities. The government finalized the implementation instructions with all concerned ministries early in the year and continued to disseminate them to all provinces and in Vientiane. Under the decree, any religious groups must register with the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) as associated with one of the four religious groups already recognized by the government. According to religious leaders, freedom of religion tended to decline in the rural areas. International nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) said government restrictions on registered or unregistered minority religious groups, particularly Protestant groups, remained disproportionately limiting in certain remote regions. Reports continued of authorities, especially in isolated villages, arresting, detaining, and exiling followers of minority religions, particularly Christians. For example, a district level official in Houaphan Province expelled 26 Hmong Christians from their village and advised they could return to their village only if they renounced Christianity. There were reports of authorities detaining new converts to Christianity, as well as detention or withholding of necessary documentation from Christians to force them to renounce their faith. Christian groups also reported longstanding problems registering and constructing churches in some areas. Reportedly, Christians who congregated in homes and other unregistered facilities for religious purposes were in some cases subjected to harassment by authorities.

According to government and religious group sources, tension continued in the countryside between animists and growing Christian communities. Animists in some cases again reportedly interfered with Christian burials, and the conversion of young persons to Christianity or the refusal of Protestants to participate in local non-Christian religious ceremonies sometimes continued to result in friction.

U.S. embassy officials regularly raised specific religious freedom cases with the government to continue an open dialogue and encourage resolution of conflicts,

including concerning implementation of the 2016 prime ministerial decree. The embassy maintained regular contact with officials in the MOHA and the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), which is a mass organization of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and is responsible for some administration of religious organizations. Embassy officials were also in regular contact with religious leaders and laypersons from a wide variety of denominations and faiths to understand better the problems they face in practicing their religions.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.1 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2015 national census, 64.7 percent of the population is Buddhist, 1.7 percent Christian, 31.4 percent has no religion, and the remaining 2.1 percent identify as other or having a nonlisted religion. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion of the ethnic or "lowland" Lao, who constitute 53.2 percent of the overall population. According to the LFNC and MOHA, the remainder of the population comprises at least 48 ethnic minority groups, most of which practice animism and ancestor worship. Animism is predominant among Sino-Thai groups, such as the Thai Dam and Thai Daeng, and the Mon-Khmer and Burmo-Tibetan groups. Among lowland Lao, many pre-Buddhist animist beliefs are incorporated into Theravada Buddhist practice, particularly in rural areas. Roman Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Bahais, Mahayana Buddhists, and followers of Confucianism in total constitute less than 3 percent of the population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the right and freedom to believe or not believe in any religion and states citizens are equal before the law regardless of their beliefs or ethnic group. The government officially recognizes four religious umbrella groups – Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahai Faith. It generally requires other religious groups to affiliate with one of these four groups in order to operate legally. The constitution also states the government respects and protects all lawful activities of Buddhists and followers of other religions, and "mobilizes and encourages Buddhist monks and novices as well as the priests of other religions to participate in activities that are beneficial to the country and people." It prohibits all acts that create division between religious groups and classes of persons.

A 2016 decree with the stated intent of clarifying rules for religious practice extends registration requirements to Buddhist groups, which had previously enjoyed a de facto exemption, and defines the government's role as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities. The decree also sets forth regulations for religious practice; the government implemented and sent instructions on the decree in the capital and to all provinces during the year. The decree reiterates the constitution's priority that religious practice should serve national interests by promoting development and education and by instructing believers to be good citizens. The decree's stated purpose is to set the principles, regulations, and laws concerning the governance and protection of religious activities for clergy, teachers of religion, believers, and religious groups in order to preserve and promote national culture, increase solidarity among members of religious groups, and "preserve and develop the nation."

The 2016 decree states nearly all aspects of religious practice – such as congregating, holding religious services, building houses of worship, modifying existing structures, and establishing new congregations in villages where none existed – require permission from a local MOHA branch office, regardless of whether a group is recognized or registered nationally. Some cases require approval from the central-level MOHA. The decree empowers MOHA to order the cessation of any religious activities or beliefs not in agreement with policies, traditional customs, laws, or regulations within its jurisdiction. It may stop any religious activity threatening national stability, peace, and social order, causing serious damage to the environment, or affecting national solidarity or unity between tribes and religions, including threats to the lives, properties, health, or reputations of others. The decree also requires MOHA to collect information and statistics on religious operations, cooperate with foreign countries and international organizations regarding religious activities, and report religious activities to the government.

The 2016 decree prohibits individuals, organizations with a legal personality, and social establishments from causing division among ethnic groups and religions.

The 2016 decree requires any religious groups operating in the country to register with MOHA. The decree and implementing regulations do not mention the government's official recognition of four umbrella religious groups – Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahai Faith – under which all religious groups have historically been advised to operate. Neither the decree nor implementing regulations mention that government-recognized Christian denominations are limited to the Catholic Church, the Laos Evangelical Church (LEC), and the

Seventh-day Adventist Church, or the government instruction that all other Christian denominations wishing to be recognized register as part of the LEC, instead of receiving separate recognition.

The same decree stipulates that religious groups must present information on elected or appointed officeholders in committees of responsibility to national, provincial, and district and village level MOHA offices for review, consideration, and certification. MOHA and the related lower-level offices also have authority to issue certificates for religious groups.

Religious groups operating in multiple provinces must obtain national MOHA approval; groups operating in multiple districts are required to obtain provincial level approval; and groups operating in multiple villages are required to obtain district level approval. If a religious group wishes to operate beyond its local congregation, approvals at the corresponding level are required. A religious occurring outside a religious group's property requires village authority approval. Activities in another village require approval from district authorities, from provincial authorities for activities in another district, and from national authorities for activities in another province. Religious groups must submit annual plans of all activities other than routine events in advance for local authorities to review, investigate, and approve.

All houses of worship must register under the law and applicable regulations. Any maintenance, restoration, and construction activities at religious facilities must receive MOHA approval from all levels. Local authorities may provide opinions regarding building, care, and maintenance of religious facilities, present their findings to their respective provincial governors and city mayors for consideration, and subsequently ask the minister of home affairs to investigate, consider, and approve activities conducted in religious facilities.

Individuals entering the clergy for more than three months require approval from district and village authorities, agreement from the receiving religious establishment, and agreement from a guardian or spouse, if applicable. For a period less than three months, the village authority, as well as a guardian or spouse, if applicable, must approve. The shorter period stipulations are particularly relevant to Buddhists, as every Buddhist male is expected to enter the monkhood at least once in his life, often for fewer than three months.

The Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) and MOHA must approve the travel of clergy and religious teachers traveling abroad for specialist studies.

Generally, any students going abroad for study require approval from the MOES. Religious organizations conducting religious activities overseas must receive approval from the appropriate geographical MOHA level in Laos.

The LFNC may educate and meet with religious leaders, clergy, teachers, and members to ensure compliance with laws and regulations, aim to reduce ethnic and religious tensions, and “contribute to the development of the nation.” LFNC officials may listen to opinions and concerns of religious communities in order to work with police or other authorities to investigate and resolve problems.

The government controls written materials for mass consumption, including for religious use. The 2016 decree regulates the importation and printing of religious materials and production of books, documents, icons, and symbols of various religions. MOHA may require the relevant religious group to certify the imported materials are truly representative of their religion, to address issues of authenticity, and to ensure imported materials comport with values and practices in the country. The law prohibits the import or export of unapproved printed or electronic religious materials.

The 2016 decree states the government may continue to sponsor Buddhist facilities, incorporate Buddhist rituals and ceremonies in state functions, and promote Buddhism as an element of the country’s cultural and spiritual identity and as the predominant religion of the country.

The 2016 decree requires Buddhist clergy to have identification cards, and clergy of other religions are required to have certificates to prove they have received legitimate religious training.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, with a reservation that Article 18 on freedom of religion shall not be construed as authorizing or encouraging any activities to directly or indirectly coerce or compel an individual to believe or not to believe in a religion or to change his or her religion or belief, and that all acts that create division and discrimination among ethnic groups and religious groups are incompatible with the article.

Government Practices

Summary paragraph: There were reports authorities subjected some religious minority members to attempted forced renunciations, imprisonment, arrest, detention, and fines. Leaders of the recognized minority religions said they were

aware of fewer of these types of incidents among villagers who had converted to Christianity than in previous years; in most cases, those arrested were fined and/or released. Persons arrested or detained received little protection under the law and could be held for lengthy periods without trial and then released, according to reports. In some cases local officials reportedly threatened Protestants with arrest or expulsion from their villages if they did not comply with certain orders. For example, a district-level official in Houaphan Province expelled 26 recently converted Hmong Christians from their village and advised they could return to their village only if they renounced Christianity. Some local officials withheld required documentation, such as titles to land usage rights, from Christians to force them to renounce their faith, or denied issuance of travel documents. NGOs stated the relatively decentralized nature of the government structure contributed to abuses by local officials, some of whom reportedly were unaware of laws and policies protecting religious freedom or unwilling to implement them. Religious groups stated that most, if not all, instances of abuse occurred in remote villages. Local authorities in many areas considered group worship in homes illegal, while Protestant groups reported they sometimes could not obtain permission to build new churches. As many as three-fourths of the LEC congregations throughout the country did not have permanent church structures and conducted worship services in homes.

In February officials detained five Christian pastors in Attapeu Province for traveling beyond their village limits to proselytize without prior authorization and for crossing the Vietnamese border, and returning, without valid travel documents, religious leaders in Vientiane reported. Authorities released the pastors after a few weeks, after the group paid a “fine” totaling 57.4 million kip (\$6,900).

In October in Phonxay District of Luang Prabang Province, officials detained for less than one day four Christians at the district public security office for their beliefs, according to religious leaders in Vientiane. Officials elsewhere in Luang Prabang Province tried to pressure a recovered drug addict in remote, ethnically Khmu, Huyano Village to renounce Christianity or face drug charges. Officials detained him for three weeks until he paid a fine of 3.5 million kip (\$420). Elders in the same village tried to pressure three other Christians to renounce their religion, while four others reportedly renounced under pressure in the past year. By year’s end provincial and central government officials had failed to act on local Christian leaders’ requests for assistance; local officials continued to enforce the will of village elders.

In December religious leaders reported a number of incidents that occurred during the Christmas season involving detentions of Christians traveling without permission to attend religious events outside of their normal locales. In some incidents, government officials reprimanded Christians for holding small gatherings in private homes to celebrate Christmas without receiving prior authorization. In Vientiane Province, local police arrested six Christians for traveling without permission for religious purposes. Although central authorities requested provincial officials release the six detainees after payment of a small court fee, those authorities had not released the detainees by year's end. Provincial authorities required each detainee to pay six million kip (\$730) in fines to provincial authorities as a condition of release. Religious leaders reported various incidents throughout the country related to the issue of lack of prior travel permission; most other cases were resolved within hours of occurrence.

In February religious leaders in Vientiane reported that in Houy Poong and Hinpan villages in Luang Prabang Province, local officials told ethnic Khmu and Hmong families to abandon their Christian practices or be evicted from the village. When the families refused to do so, officials initially told them to move to another province, but other officials then stopped the families at the provincial border. They ordered the families to return to their village, but subsequently officials prevented them from accessing their farmland to plant crops. In each case, officials confiscated titles to land usage rights to attempt to force their renunciations, but allowed them to keep their household registration documents so they could move elsewhere. Eventually, most of the affected families chose to resettle in other villages in the province, and one family renounced Christianity. In a separate incident near Luang Prabang, authorities arrested a village's first convert to Christianity, pushing him to renounce his new religion. After Christian leaders in Vientiane intervened with the government, authorities released the individual.

In February in Son District, Houaphan Province, a district-level official expelled 26 Hmong Christians from their village and advised they could return only if they renounced Christianity, according to religious leaders in Vientiane. The official also confiscated the individuals' land usage rights documents. The local level LFNC provided the group with temporary shelter in the district capital for several months, but at year's end, the Christians remained unable to return to their village. Provincial officials, including provincial assembly members, reportedly tried to persuade village elders to allow these Christians to return.

According to religious groups, in April 2016 in Khamkeut District, Bolikhamxay Province, village leaders forced 10 Christian families to leave for allegedly

creating conflict and disrupting village harmony by dividing the village into followers of more than one religion. During the year local officials in the village to which the Christian families had fled allowed them to purchase land rights to set up homes, farm, and send their children to local schools; however, household registration papers for new properties had not been issued by local authorities by the end of the year.

Government officials said the country was open to all religions, although authorities continued to provide official recognition to only four groups. The LEC continued to serve as an umbrella group for all registered Christian denominations other than Catholics or Seventh-day Adventists, as religious leaders reported applications for new Christian groups were too difficult to have recognized. Several unregistered Christian denominations attempted to register independently from the LEC due to differences in doctrinal beliefs; their applications were still pending at year's end.

Although the law prohibits members of religious groups not registered with MOHA or the LFNC from practicing their faith, several reportedly did so quietly without interference. Christian groups seeking official recognition separate from the LEC continued to be targets of restrictions, and authorities in several provinces insisted independent congregations join the LEC. In many areas, however, local authorities allowed unauthorized churches to conduct services unhindered.

Religious leaders continued to indicate Christians appeared to be the fastest growing religious community, and Christians reported facing the most difficulties with local authorities and the general population. Their growth was most evident in rural areas, which led to frequent reports of conflicts with local communities and local authorities.

According to religious groups, both local and central government officials referred to the constitution, the former and current prime ministerial decrees, and social harmony as reasons for restricting and monitoring religious activity, especially the activities of new or small Christian organizations among minority ethnic groups.

According to Muslim community leaders, Muslims were able to practice openly at the two active mosques in Vientiane, the only mosques in the country. According to the Muslim Association, its leaders met regularly with LFNC and MOHA officials and maintained an effective working relationship with the government. The government permitted individuals from Thailand to conduct Tabligh teachings.

While animists generally reported little governmental interference, the government actively discouraged animist practices that it deemed outdated, dangerous, or illegal, such as the practice in some tribes of killing children born with defects or burying the bodies of deceased relatives beneath homes.

Representatives of Bahai communities in Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Luang Prabang reported that local authorities generally did not interfere with or restrict their activities. In October Bahais held a public event at the LFNC's training offices, which was attended by high-ranking officials from various ministries and included representatives of nearly all recognized religious communities.

Religious leaders said authorities enforced a ban on proselytizing in public, although this did not generally impede individuals from speaking about their beliefs to others in private settings or among friends. Authorities enforced rules requiring that programs or activities conducted outside houses of worship receive prior approval from local or higher officials.

Authorities sought to control the importation of religious materials from outside the country. MOHA officials said they were concerned that imported religious materials and texts might include content that differed from domestic practices, and enforced such controls "to avoid misunderstandings."

Provincial, district, and local officials, as well as the MOHA Department of Ethnic and Religious Affairs, LFNC representatives, and local Protestant leaders and community leaders did not meet again following 2016 negotiations concerning confiscations of churches in prior years, including one property in Vientiane Capital and fewer than eight properties in Savannakhet Province. The pending cases were unresolved at year's end.

Due to difficulties obtaining building permits from local authorities, as many as three-fourths of the LEC congregations throughout the country did not have permanent church structures and conducted worship services in homes. The LFNC Religious Affairs Department continued to urge that house churches be replaced with designated church structures whenever possible; local authorities in many areas considered group worship in homes illegal. Religious group representatives said the building permit process began at the local level and then required district, provincial, and ultimately central-level LFNC and MOHA permission. They said local officials used the process to block construction of new churches.

Many religious leaders said they experienced lengthy delays in obtaining permits for church construction, and generally received no response to requests. According to the LFNC, many of the delays involved legal matters concerning construction, or in some cases, a cluster of Christian families in a village wished to build two or three churches in their village, which would result in more churches than local authorities thought the number of Christians would justify. The LFNC said this led to conflict with other religions in the village that often had an equal number of temples, and therefore local authorities did not permit the construction of additional churches. The LFNC cited counter examples in which a Catholic church, a Protestant church, and several Buddhist temples existed in harmony.

According to MOES, there was no Buddhist curriculum taught as religion in any public schools. The government, however, promoted the teaching of Buddhist practices in public schools as part of national culture. Mandatory cultural sessions included lessons taught in Buddhist temples and, to advance to the next grade level, educational authorities required all students to pray in Buddhist temples. Christian students reported discomfort with the requirement. MOES said it allowed parents to remove their children from the classes if they were dissatisfied with the program. In several provinces, however, lessons in Buddhism were still mandatory to pass to the next grade level, reportedly sometimes as a form of punishment of Christian students. This was especially true in areas where temples provided education because the government was unable to support a public school. A number of private schools affiliated with various religious groups existed throughout the country and accepted students from any religious denomination.

Religious groups stated they were aware of no openly non-Buddhist or nonanimist government officials in higher-level posts at provincial or national levels.

In cases that came to officials' attention, the government strictly enforced a prohibition on proselytizing by foreigners, which reportedly continued to be widespread although conducted mainly in small private settings. Christian leaders from foreign countries reported local congregations often requested they not preach from the pulpit to avoid the perception that foreigners were proselytizing citizens. In May security officials briefly detained a tour guide in Luang Prabang when foreign members of his tour group distributed religious materials to some villagers. The tourists left the country before authorities could question them.

With advance permission and no open proselytizing, government authorities permitted Lao and expatriate Christians to organize a public, open-air religious music event for the first time. The Vientiane International Gospel Music Festival

took place October 27-29 at the night market of That Luang Lake Specific Economic Zone, with performances by local and foreign artists and bands.

Religious groups said provincial government officials asked religious leaders not to report grievances to foreigners in exchange for greater religious freedom. According to religious groups, the central government continued efforts to keep individuals who had been arrested, banished, punished, marginalized, or had otherwise been the victim of abuses due to their religious beliefs out of sight of international observers.

In dealing with local conflicts regarding religious problems, officials at MOHA reported they first waited for the provinces to resolve the issue before getting involved. Government officials from MOHA and LFNC officials again acknowledged some local officials were on occasion incorrectly applying regulations or in fact creating their own regulations contrary to national law.

The LFNC and MOHA stated they continued to visit occasionally areas where abuses of religious freedom had reportedly taken place to instruct local officials on government policy and law. LFNC and MOHA officials said they frequently traveled to the provinces to encourage religious groups to practice in accordance with the country's laws and regulations. They also hosted training workshops for local officials to explain officials' obligations under the constitution and the right to believe or not to believe in religion. During these sessions, central authorities provided training to provincial LFNC and MOHA officials on the 2016 decree and other laws governing religion and held seminars that reviewed the basic tenets of Buddhism, Christianity, the Bahai Faith, and Islam from religious leaders. With support from an international NGO, MOHA and/or the LFNC held workshops and seminars in Vientiane Capital and Xaysomboun Province in January; Vientiane Province in February and August; and in Xiengkhuang, Phongsaly, and Savannakhet Provinces in September, October, and November, respectively. They also held a seminar in December in Ngoi District, Luang Prabang Province, where several problems has arisen early in the year. The national government funded a workshop in mid-2017 in Houaphanh Province.

Observers said the government approved implementation guidelines for the 2016 decree much more quickly than it did for other new decrees. The officially recognized religious groups supported the government's dissemination efforts by printing and distributing the decree and its implementation guidelines.

In collaboration with the LFNC, an international NGO continued to conduct training for provincial and district officials and local religious leaders throughout the year. The training was designed to help the officials and religious leaders understand the law and each other better, and to address religious leaders' continuing concerns about the eviction of religious minority families and the subsequent confiscation of their property in various villages.

Officials continued to state there were cases where Buddhist or animist prisoners have converted to Christianity in prison in the hope their new religious group may press for their release or a reduced sentence on religious grounds.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Christian sources reported occasional interreligious tensions among some minority ethnic groups, particularly in response to the growth of Christian congregations or disagreements over access to village resources.

The refusal by members of non-Buddhist groups, particularly Protestants, to participate in Buddhist or animist ceremonies continued to be a source of tension in rural areas. In some cases, villagers threatened Christians with expulsion from the village if they did not renounce their faith. Christian group leaders, however, encouraged their members to work out a compromise allowing them to support local Buddhist or animist ceremonies without participating in them. Members of some Christian groups said they could not make such compromises, which they said would violate their religious beliefs.

Christians said conflicts with animists regarding burial practices remained an issue throughout the year, and Christian leaders cited cases that occurred in Khammouan, Savannakhet and Xayaburi provinces. Some animists continue to be concerned about the Christian practice of burying their dead within the village boundary or nearby confines, believing that the deceased's spirit would bring disharmony to the village and conflict with the village spirits because the body was not cremated.

Officials and press reported cases in remote villages in which animist family members reported their Christian convert children or grandchildren damaged or destroyed animist relics. Elder animists said they opposed their younger family members adopting nonanimist beliefs and threatened them via various means, including government intervention. According to both religious leaders in Vientiane and central government officials, some of these conflicts may not

involve religion specifically, but rather other family or village disputes. Local officials or village elders possibly addressed these problems at face value in terms of religious differences instead of determining underlying problems. It was sometimes difficult for those in Vientiane to differentiate whether the problems reported were religious in nature.

Some religious leaders partly agreed with the government's 'social harmony' rationale for monitoring and oversight of religious activities. They said misunderstandings continued to occur, which they said was due to low education levels in remote parts of the country and some local animists' not having prior exposure to nonanimists.

Several private preschools and English-language schools received support from religious groups abroad of various denominations. Many boys received instruction in religion and other subjects in Buddhist temples, which continued to play a traditional schooling role in smaller communities where formal education was limited or unavailable. Two Buddhist colleges and two Buddhist secondary schools provided religious training for children and adults. Christian denominations, particularly the LEC and Seventh-day Adventists, conducted religious education for children and youth. Bahai groups conducted religious training for children and adult members. The Catholic Church operated a seminary in Khammouane Province for students with high school degrees to study philosophy and theology for two to 10 years. The Muslim community offered limited educational training.

Some members of ethnic groups associated with the United States during the Vietnam War era said they felt abandoned by the United States and had rejected Christianity, which they viewed as an American religion. This sentiment reportedly led to problems in remote areas where these ethnic communities placed additional pressure on Christians, including by their own families and neighbors.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials regularly advocated with a range of government officials for religious freedom and the reform of relevant laws and decrees to ensure they were consistent with international human rights standards. In frequent exchanges with MOHA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the LFNC Religious Affairs Department, embassy officials discussed the need for swift and appropriate resolution of specific cases of arrest, abuse, or harassment; and cumbersome registration procedures; and trends in abuses of religious freedom. Embassy

officials also engaged the government on its management of religious practices in the provinces, including forced or threatened detentions, removal from villages, evictions, and other problems, especially for recent converts. Embassy officials regularly followed up on developments with religious leaders and government officials.

In May the embassy sponsored participation of an official from the Religious Affairs Department of the LFNC in a three-week program in the United States on Religious Freedom, Diversity and Tolerance.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials met with religious leaders and advocacy groups to address religious equality concerns. A senior Department of State official met with religious leaders in Xieng Khouang Province to understand the constraints they faced at the provincial level. Embassy officials regularly consulted registered and unregistered religious groups regarding reports of arrests of religious followers, cumbersome registration procedures, and abuses of freedom to worship, including during visits to Luang Prabang Province.