

# **CAMBODIA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution states Buddhism is the state religion, and it is promoted by the government through holiday observances, religious training, Buddhist instruction in public schools, 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. The law does not allow non-Buddhist denominations to proselytize publicly. The government continued to refuse to allow the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to accept permanently a group of Christian Montagnards from Vietnam who came to the country to claim refugee status. The government returned some land to indigenous communities, which predominantly practice animist beliefs, after initially offering it to a foreign company as a concession for development.

The press reported that villagers killed at least two people suspected of practicing sorcery due to their animist beliefs and practices. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that witchcraft-related crimes were still common and between 2012 and 2018, there were at least 49 incidents. There were continued reports of societal barriers to the integration of the predominantly Muslim Cham ethnic minority as well as Christians.

U.S. embassy officials regularly raised religious freedom and tolerance with Ministry of Cults and Religion (MCR) representatives and other government officials. Some embassy programs continued to focus on the preservation of religious cultural sites.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 16.7 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the MCR, approximately 95 percent of the population is Buddhist, of whom 95 percent practice Theravada Buddhism. The remaining 5 percent of the population includes Christians, Muslims, animists, Baha'is, Jews, and Cao Dai adherents. Ethnic Vietnamese traditionally practice Mahayana Buddhism, although many have adopted Theravada Buddhism. Other ethnic Vietnamese practice Roman Catholicism, and these make up the vast majority of Catholics in the country. Catholics constitute 0.4 percent of the population.

Nongovernmental estimates of the Protestant population, including evangelical Christians, vary but are less than 2 percent of the total population.

According to government estimates, approximately 2.1 percent of the population is Muslim, although some nongovernmental organizations estimate Muslims constitute 4 to 5 percent of the population. 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, practiced by as many as 90 percent of Muslims in the country; the Salafi (Wahhabi); the indigenous Iman-San; and the Kadiani.

An estimated 0.28 percent of the population are ethnic Phnong, the majority of whom follow animistic religious practices. An additional estimated 0.25 percent of the population includes Baha'is, Jews, and Cao Dai adherents.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for freedom of belief and religious worship, as long as 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, but it does not elaborate the legal consequences for those who violate this restriction. 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. The law mandates that groups must inform the government of the goals of their religious organization; describe their activities; provide biographical information for all religious leaders; describe funding sources; submit 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 that can take up to 90 days. There are no penalties for failing to register,

but registered religious groups receive an income tax exemption from the Ministry of Economy and Finance.

The law bans non-Buddhist groups from proselytizing publicly and stipulates that non-Buddhist literature may be distributed only inside religious institutions. The law also prohibits offers of money or materials to convince persons to convert.

The law requires separate registration of all places of worship and religious schools. Authorities may shut down temporarily unregistered places of worship and religious schools until they are registered, although there were no reports of the MCR enforcing this. 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. 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). The MOEYS advises religious schools to follow the ministry’s core curriculum, which does not include a religious component; however, schools may supplement the ministry’s core curriculum with Buddhist lessons. The government requires public schools to coordinate with MOEYS when implementing supplemental Buddhist lessons. Non-Buddhist students may opt out of this instruction. The law does not allow non-Buddhist religious instruction in public schools. Non-Buddhist religious instruction may be provided by private institutions.

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

### **Government Practices**

Nuon Chea, sentenced to life imprisonment in 2018 related to charges of ethnic- and religious-based genocide against ethnic Vietnamese and the Cham population during the Khmer Rouge era from 1975 to 1979, died at the age of 93, before the Khmer Rouge Tribunal had heard his appeal of the verdict.

The government continued to refuse to allow the UNHCR to permanently accept a group of Christian Montagnards from Vietnam who came to the country to claim refugee status. Of the estimated 200 Christian Montagnards who had fled Vietnam and were in Cambodia in 2017, 27 remained in the country. The government deported four back to Vietnam in June. Rights activists expressed concern that Montagnards deported to Vietnam would face harsh treatment upon their return. The UNHCR said that one of the four returned voluntarily, while the other three were found ineligible for refugee status by the UNHCR. Again in June, the government said it would allow the remaining 27 to move to a third country if the UNHCR would obtain approval from the Vietnamese government. The UNHCR rejected the proposal, however, saying the Cambodian government should communicate with the Vietnamese government directly.

The government continued to promote Buddhist holidays by grants of official status and declarations of government holidays. The government also provided Buddhist training and education to monks and laypersons in pagodas, and it gave financial support to an institute that performed research and published materials on Khmer culture and Buddhist traditions. The government did not grant similar treatment to other religious groups, including by declaring religious holidays.

On May 7, Prime Minister Hun Sen hosted an iftar, with Member of the Malaysian Parliament Wan Junaidi bin Tuanku Jaafar, a member of the Selagor Islamic Religious Council, representatives of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, 320 Muslims of 32 foreign nationalities, and 4,750 Cambodian Muslims in attendance. This marked the sixth straight year the prime minister hosted the event and he pledged to continue doing so. In his remarks, he promised to maintain “religious harmony to ensure Cambodia is free from ethnic and religious conflict.”

In October at a dinner with 3,000 Christians in Phnom Penh, Prime Minister Hun Sen stated that the country did not experience any religious conflict. He encouraged those in attendance to maintain peace, security, and public order in the country.

In May, at a Quran recitation ceremony, Deputy Prime Minister Men Sam An called on Muslims in the country to oppose foreign intervention in the country’s internal affairs. She asked Muslims to “maintain peace, political stability, territorial sovereignty, and oppose attempts to have a color revolution and any attempts to meddle in internal national issues.”

On May 8, Health Minister Mam Bunheng issued a statement ordering all directors of public hospitals to prepare prayer rooms nationwide to facilitate the worship of Muslim staff and patients. On May 15, the MOEYS followed suit and requested 125 state and private institutes and universities across the country to add prayer rooms to their campuses.

On March 26, the government announced a decision to remove 742 hectares (1,800 acres) of land from an economic concession to Vietnamese company Hoang Anh Gia Lai and return it to indigenous communities in Rattanakiri Province, which predominantly practice animist beliefs.

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

On January 21, in Anlong Vil commune, Sangke District, Battambang Province, according to media reports, Vong Den attacked and killed Nork Sorl with an axe. The report stated that Den accused Sorl of using magic to make him and his family sick. The police arrested Den the day following the attack and charged him with premeditated murder.

On April 14, in Sre Chhok commune, Keo Seima District, Mondulakiri Province, according to media reports, Norn Mao shot Phchuch Phos while Phos was asleep in his home. Mao accused Phos of using magic to cause him and his family to be sick. The police arrested Mao on the same day, charging him with premeditated murder.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that witchcraft-related crimes had decreased in urban centers, but remained an issue in remote areas. From 2012 to 2018, the OHCHR recorded 49 witchcraft-related crimes, among which 35 involved killings and 14 attempted killings and harassment.

There were reports from members of the Cham Muslim community of barriers to social integration, including barriers to job prospects and socio-economic advancement. Local media reported that some members of the majority Buddhist community continued to view the Cham and other minority ethnic groups with suspicion as purported practitioners of sorcery.

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

Embassy officials regularly raised with MCR representatives and other government officials the importance of fully integrating religious minorities into Cambodian society and the benefits of supporting religious pluralism.

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 officers met periodically with ethnic Cham and other Muslim community members to support religious tolerance, respect for minority culture, and equal economic opportunity and integration of ethnic minorities into the wider culture. During several visits to the region, senior Washington officials also met with local authorities and civil society members to promote religious freedom.

Some embassy programs specifically focused on supporting the preservation of religious cultural sites.