

LAOS 2019 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 religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Baha’i Faith. Decree 315, issued in 2016 with the stated intent of clarifying rules for religious practice, defines the government as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities. Religious leaders said while authorities in urban areas and in some districts had a strong understanding of laws governing religious activities, improper restrictions on religious freedom remained prevalent in rural areas. Reports continued of local authorities, especially in isolated villages, arresting and detaining followers of minority religions, particularly Christians. Media reported that in March police arrested a member of the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) in Phin District, Savannakhet Province, for allegedly cutting down a tree in a protected forest. The man said he was arrested because he was Christian and that while he was in detention, police beat him on the head and administered electric shocks. In April authorities detained three U.S. citizens for 10 days in Luang Namtha Province for distributing religious pamphlets and other materials without government permission. There were reports of local authorities warning citizens not to convert to Christianity and forbidding Christians to gather for religious services. District officials in Houaphan Province instructed village leaders to deny any applications for identification or other government documents to anyone registered with local authorities as a Christian. Previously, the government encouraged various Christian denominations to register under the auspices of the LEC, but in August the Seventh-day Adventist Church registered independently with the government. Religious leaders continued to say Decree 315 established onerous requirements sometimes used to restrict travel for religious purposes. Christian groups continued to report problems constructing churches in some areas. Reportedly, there were incidents in rural areas where local authorities harassed Christians who congregated in homes and other unregistered facilities for religious purposes. Members of minority religions said they had to hide their religious affiliation in order to join the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, the government, and the military, and to avoid facing discrimination in these institutions. The National Assembly held a three-day workshop on religious freedom in October; representatives from many religious organizations attended, along with central and provincial level government officials. Central authorities said they continued to travel to provincial areas to train officials to implement Decree 315 and other laws governing religion properly.

According to government and religious group sources, tensions continued in rural areas between animists, Buddhists, and growing Christian communities. Religious leaders said in some rural areas there were reports that villagers threatened to expel Christians from the village if they did not renounce their faith. Burial ceremonies remained a point of contention, with some reports of animists preventing the burial of Christians in public cemeteries.

U.S. embassy officials regularly raised specific religious freedom cases and issues regarding cumbersome government regulations, including registration procedures, with the government, and continued to encourage open dialogue and conflict resolution. The embassy maintained regular contact with officials in the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) and other government agencies and discussed the challenges faced by religious groups and government efforts to improve religious freedom. Embassy officials maintained regular contact with leaders from a wide variety of religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to understand better the problems faced by minority religious groups. In September the embassy organized a series of concerts by an American gospel music group for local audiences, which culminated in the country's first "interfaith musical exchange."

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.3 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2015 national census, 64.7 percent of the population is Buddhist, 1.7 percent is Christian, 31.4 percent report having no religion, and the remaining 2.1 percent belong to other religions. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion of the ethnic or "lowland" Lao, who constitute 53.2 percent of the overall population. According to the Lao Front for National Development (LFND, formerly the Lao Front for National Construction), an organization associated with the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) that, along with the MOHA, is responsible for the administration of religious organizations, the remainder of the population comprises 50 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, Baha'is, Mahayana Buddhists, Seventh-day Adventists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), and followers of Confucianism together constitute less

than 3 percent of the population. According to the international Christian rights advocacy NGO Aid to the Church in Need's 2018 Religious Freedom Report, Christians comprise 3.2 percent of the population. The Catholic Church estimates its membership at 55,000, and the LEC estimates its membership at 200,000. Muslim community leaders estimate the community has approximately 1,000 members.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for “the right and freedom to believe or not to believe in religion” and states citizens are equal before the law regardless of their beliefs or ethnic group. 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. The government officially recognizes four religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Baha'i Faith.

Decree 315 upholds “respect for the religious rights and freedom” of both believers and nonbelievers. 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 decree clarifies rules for religious practice and defines the government as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities. The decree reiterates the constitutional priority that religious practice should serve national interests by promoting development and education and by instructing believers to be good citizens.

The decree requires any religious group operating in the country to register with the MOHA. The decree extends registration requirements to Buddhist groups, which had previously had a de facto exemption. Groups may, but are not required to, affiliate with an officially recognized religious group.

Under the decree, religious groups must present information on elected or appointed officeholders to national, provincial, district, and village-level MOHA offices for review and certification. 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 group wishes to operate beyond its local congregation, it must obtain approval at the corresponding level. A religious activity 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, including routine events, in advance for local authorities to review and approve.

The decree states nearly all aspects of religious practice – such as congregating, holding religious services, travel for religious officials, building houses of worship, modifying existing structures, and establishing new congregations in villages where none existed – require permission from a provincial, district-level, and/or central MOHA office. The MOHA may order the cessation of any religious activities or expression of beliefs not in agreement with policies, traditional customs, laws, or regulations within its jurisdiction. It may stop any religious activity it deems threatening to 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 requires the 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 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 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 building permit process for constructing houses of worship begins with an application to local authorities, and then requires district, provincial, and ultimately central-level LFND and MOHA permission. All houses of worship must register under the law and conform to applicable regulations. Religious organizations must own 5,000 square meters (54,000 square feet) of land to construct a place of

worship. The MOHA at all levels must approve any maintenance, restoration, and construction activities at religious facilities. 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 MOHA to review and approve activities conducted in religious facilities.

According to the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES), although there is no Buddhist curriculum taught as religion in any public schools, the government promotes the teaching of Buddhist practices in public schools as part of national culture. Cultural sessions include lessons taught in Buddhist temples. Students are required to attend prayers during these lessons. The MOES states parents may remove their children from the classes if they are dissatisfied with the program. A number of private schools affiliated with various religious groups exist throughout the country and accept students from any religious denomination.

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 of 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 MOES and MOHA must approve the travel abroad of clergy and religious teachers for specialized studies. Generally, students going abroad for any kind of study (including religious studies) require approval from the MOES. Religious organizations conducting religious activities overseas must receive approval from the appropriate geographical MOHA level.

According to the Law for Lao Front for National Development, as amended in 2018, the LFND may educate and meet with religious leaders, clergy, teachers, and members to ensure compliance with laws and regulations, reduce ethnic and religious tensions, and “contribute to the development of the nation.” LFND officials work with religious communities, police, and other authorities.

The government controls written materials for religious audiences. The decree regulates the importation and printing of religious materials and production of books, documents, icons, and symbols of various religions. The Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism and the MOHA must approve religious texts or

other materials before they are imported. The MOHA may require religious groups to certify the imported materials are truly representative of their religions, 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.

In June the government issued Decree 184 that defines principles and rules for civil servant ethics. The decree states government officials must provide services “in an equal, prompt, and fair manner without discrimination against gender, age, ethnic groups, social status, education levels, and faith.”

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), 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

Religious leaders said while authorities in urban areas and in some districts had a strong understanding of laws governing religious activities, including Decree 315, improper restrictions on religious freedom remained prevalent in rural areas. Reports continued of local authorities, especially in isolated villages, arresting and detaining followers of minority religions, particularly Christians.

According to Radio Free Asia (RFA), seven Christian church members were released on January 2 after paying a fine of 700,000 kip (\$79). Police in Nakanong Village, Phin District, Savannakhet Province, had arrested the seven – three church leaders and four other Christians – on December 29, 2018, for conducting an “illegal” church service. The Human Rights Watcher for Lao Religious Freedom, a U.S.-based NGO, reported village authorities also demolished the church stage, cut the power line, destroyed the sound system, and seized three mobile phones.

According to Asia News, RFA, and local sources, in March police arrested a member of the LEC in Phin District, Savannakhet Province, for cutting down a tree in a protected forest. Local sources said this was a pretext, since none of the other members of the group, who were all non-Christians, were arrested. The man said that while he was detained, police beat him on the head, causing temporary loss of

hearing, and administered electric shocks. The police told him they would release him if he renounced his faith. He was released after being held for several days.

Media reported that in April authorities detained three U.S. citizens for 10 days in Luang Namtha Province for distributing religious pamphlets and other materials without government permission. The individuals were affiliated with Vision Beyond Borders, a U.S.-based Christian NGO. Provincial officials held their passports and told them they could not leave the province. After the Ministry of Public Security reviewed the case, officials returned the passports and deported the U.S. citizens to Thailand. International media reported the individuals were “treated well” when they were questioned by police.

According to government authorities, Decree 184, which defines principles and rules for civil servant ethics, was intended in part to ensure that local officials would issue government identification to Christians in rural areas. According to religious leaders, however, some local officials continued to withhold documentation. In Houaphan Province, district authorities issued a notice instructing village leaders to deny any applications for identification or other government documents of anyone registered as a Christian. An official with the Seventh-day Adventists said church members in Houaphan Province were told they would need to register as animists if they wanted to receive their identification documents. An official with a Christian organization said that in February village officials in Khammouane Province collected identification documents from Christian families and did not return them.

According to some minority religious groups, both local and central government officials referred to the constitution, Decree 315 (or its predecessor, Decree 92), and social harmony as reasons for continuing to restrict and monitor religious activity, especially the activities of new or small Christian organizations among minority ethnic group members.

During the year some registered minority religious groups, including the Catholic Church and Baha’i Faith, successfully met the annual administrative requirements outlined in Decree 315 to maintain their registration, such as providing information on the number of members, religious texts, and plans for services during the year. The LEC’s application for annual registration renewal was under review as of November. In August the Seventh-day Adventist Church successfully registered with the government for the first time.

A MOHA official said it was easier compared with previous years for new religious groups to register; however, he said, the MOHA requested religious groups explain the different practices and beliefs between various Christian denominations before approving applications. The official stated that while in the past the government encouraged other Christian denominations wishing to be recognized to register as part of the LEC, that policy was changing as new religious groups successfully registered. He said during the registration review process, the MOHA consulted with other religious groups to discuss the registration application in an attempt to minimize conflicts between established and new religious groups, which sometimes delayed registration and other approval processes.

Several unregistered religious groups, including the Church of Jesus Christ, the Methodist Church, and the Mennonite Church, stated they continued their efforts to register independently from the LEC due to differences in doctrinal beliefs. According to a MOHA official, during the year the ministry met with nonregistered religious groups, including the Church of Jesus Christ, to discuss the registration process.

Leaders with the Seventh-day Adventists reported continued difficulties registering their churches at the provincial, district, and village levels, but said they hoped the process would become easier following the Church's registration with the central government.

An international observer of religious issues in the country said that since Decree 315 was issued, Buddhist groups, who were previously exempted from registration requirements, engaged with the government more on religious issues and made an effort to meet administrative requirements they had previously ignored due to the belief that they did not need to follow the same rules as minority religions. These requirements included submitting an annual report detailing activities.

Although the law prohibited members of religious groups not registered with the MOHA or the LFND from practicing their faith, members of several groups said they continued to do so quietly and without interference, often in house churches. One Baha'i follower said his community was reluctant to gather in public, in part due to announcements made by the Ministry of Public Security at the village level that Buddhism was the only religion welcome in that village. One local LEC official confirmed the ministry made such announcements.

While religious groups said Decree 315 helped enshrine religious freedom and further clarified processes for administrative tasks, the groups also stated that some administrative requirements mandated by the decree (that were not fully implemented during the year) would be burdensome and restrictive if the government were to fully implement them. Among these were requirements to submit detailed travel plans and advance requests to hold basic religious services.

MOHA and LFND officials continued to acknowledge some local officials incorrectly applied regulations, created their own regulations contrary to national law, or were unaware of all the provisions in Decree 315. Several religious groups recommended the government devote more resources to implementing the decree and promoting religious freedom at the district and provincial level. Central government officials said they continued to train provincial and district officials on concepts of religious freedom and implementation of Decree 315 in an attempt to protect minority religious groups, but stated this was a challenge in isolated areas. An official with the Seventh-day Adventists said the government was trying to promote religious freedom, but added the government's policies and statements sometimes "fall on deaf ears" at the provincial and district level.

Authorities stated that during the year the central government, in coordination with relevant local- and provincial-level officials, conducted assessments of how Decree 315 was being implemented in the city of Vientiane, and in Luang Prabang, Savannakhet, and Bolikhamxai Provinces. Officials said they invited representatives of some, but not all, religious groups in the respective areas to provide input.

In May Radio Free Asia reported an official with the Christian aid organization Vision Beyond Borders said government authorities were "harassing Christians and breaking up meetings and making it difficult for them to gather." The official said, "Some Lao authorities remained deeply suspicious of Christians, sometimes resulting in social exclusion, harassment, and arbitrary detention by law enforcement officials."

According to local Christian officials, there were fewer incidents of authorities prohibiting services or detaining travelers attending services during the Christmas season compared with 2018. A representative of the Methodist Church said that a village authority interrupted a religious service shortly before Christmas and told the congregation it needed permission from the district Ministry of Public Security office to hold services on any day other than December 25.

Some religious groups did not comply with the requirement to obtain advance permission to travel to other jurisdictions. An official with a prominent Christian organization said submitting a comprehensive annual travel plan was not practical because church members sometimes fell sick or died unexpectedly, requiring church officials to travel immediately. An official with a Christian organization said it was “impossible” to fully comply with the requirements for in-country travel and he chose to ignore them. According to some religious groups, the government also did not fully enforce the decree’s travel notice requirement. Representatives from the Catholic Church said they joined other religious organizations asking the government to amend the decree so that religious officials would not require permission to travel within the country.

Religious leaders reported various incidents throughout the country related to obtaining travel permission. Some religious leaders stated authorities sometimes detained Christians traveling without permission to attend religious events outside their normal locales. Members of the LEC said they submitted travel plans for the Christmas season to all appropriate levels of government but did not receive all the required approvals. Some local authorities detained religious officials even with proper travel authorization; sources said most cases were resolved within hours of occurrence.

According to Muslim community leaders, the approximately 1,000-member Muslim community continued to worship at the two active mosques in Vientiane, the only mosques in the country. According to the leader of the Muslim Association, Muslims maintained a strong working relationship with both the LFND and the MOHA and did not encounter challenges from the government regarding freedom of worship. He said the community avoided actions that could be deemed incompatible with Lao culture.

The government continued to enforce rules requiring programs or activities conducted outside houses of worship to receive prior approval from local or higher authorities.

Christian religious leaders said the government continued to strictly enforce a prohibition on proselytizing in public, including by foreigners. Both the Church of Jesus Christ and the Seventh-day Adventists reported they had missionaries in the country, but the government restricted their activities to teaching English and promoting good health practices, such as hygiene and sanitation. Missionaries could not engage in religious discussions. Several religious groups said they welcomed foreign members visiting the country but needed to be cautious about

the kinds of activities foreigners engaged in. The Church of Jesus Christ said it relied on word-of-mouth to attract new members.

Authorities continued to control imports of religious materials, but several religious groups said they could access most religious texts and documents online. MOHA officials said they coordinated with religious groups to review imported materials to help ensure these were in accordance with the organization's beliefs.

Several minority religious groups reported problems building places of worship, although the LFND Religious Affairs Department stated it continued to urge that designated church structures replace house churches whenever possible. An MOHA official said the government encouraged religious groups to hold services in churches or temples, rather than in homes. The LEC reported operating approximately 600 churches throughout the country and conducting worship services in many more "unofficial" house churches. They attributed the large number of house churches to the difficulties of obtaining building permits from local authorities. According to religious leaders, local authorities in many areas considered group worship in homes illegal and told villagers they needed permits to worship at home.

Many religious leaders said they continued to experience lengthy delays in obtaining permits for church construction and generally received no response to requests. An official with the Catholic Church said the Church routinely waited years for approval to build a new church, only to be ultimately denied. The official said in June one Catholic congregation in Vientiane Province asked for permission to rebuild its church, which was old and in need of repairs. Provincial authorities denied permission and told congregants that because a nearby highway was recently paved, they could easily travel to a different church in another village. The Catholic Church official also said guidelines for the construction of religious buildings laid out in Decree 315 were unclear.

Some sources said the legal requirement that a religious organization own 5,000 square meters (54,000 square feet) of land in order to build a church or temple limited the ability of some smaller congregations, which lacked sufficient resources, to obtain a space of that size. An official with the Seventh-day Adventist Church said the land requirement was not an issue in rural areas; however, purchasing land was expensive in cities, where most Seventh-day Adventists live. He also said the government, usually at the local level, sometimes provided land, or facilitated land use, for Buddhist temples, but Christian churches had to buy the land. The Church official expressed concern that the government

frequently retained the titles of land owned by churches, which could lead to potential problems if the churches needed to show ownership. According to a spokesperson for the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization, some Buddhist temples built on land donated by private citizens did not have the required documentation to clarify land ownership, which could lead to potential problems if a temple needed to show ownership.

According to Buddhist organizations, prominent Buddhists worked with the government to draft legislation to ensure laws reflected the role of Buddhism in Lao culture.

Christian students said they were uncomfortable with the requirement that they attend prayers in Buddhist temples during cultural classes taught there as part of the public school curriculum. In some rural areas lessons in Buddhism remained mandatory to pass to the next grade level, despite this not being an MOES requirement. This was especially true in areas where temples provided education because the government was unable to support a public school.

With advance permission and a requirement there be no open proselytizing, government authorities permitted Lao and expatriate Christians to organize a public, open-air religious music event for the third year in a row. The Vientiane International Gospel Music Festival took place November 3 at the ITECC Center shopping mall, with performances by local and foreign artists and bands. The LEC leaders said that, as in 2018, they chose to omit the word “gospel” in Lao language materials so as not to risk government censure. The word “gospel” only appeared in English-language materials.

In October the Baha’i community in Vientiane organized an event to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of the Bab, an important figure in the founding of the Baha’i Faith. Representatives from the MOHA, LFND, and National Assembly attended. Bounthavy Phonethasine, deputy director of the Religious Department at the LFND, spoke at the event and commended the Baha’i community for working towards “the betterment of the Lao community.”

An official with the Catholic Church said Catholic government officials needed to hide their religion in order to join the LPRP, government, or military, and to avoid facing discrimination in these institutions. He said a member of his church who is in the army was told he would be expelled from the army if he participated in Catholic services. Some members of religious minorities said they believed they were promoted more slowly than their peers due to their beliefs. A Seventh-day

Adventist said there was a “hidden law” mandating a citizen could not be both a Christian and a member of the LPRP. Other religious groups said it was hard for their members to join the government or advance to higher-level positions, or to become village chiefs. Religious groups stated they were aware of no openly non-Buddhist or non-animist government officials at the provincial or national levels. A MOHA official working on religious affairs said it was difficult for non-Buddhists to join the government, but the government was actively trying to promote the idea that members of all religions had the right to join.

In October the National Assembly organized a three-day conference on religious freedom. At the conference, government officials and religious leaders addressed sensitive topics, including the government’s practice of encouraging non-Buddhists to attend government-sponsored Buddhist ceremonies, which the government deemed cultural events, and misperceptions such as a prevailing but mistaken belief that Christians did not serve in the military or police. The conference participants discussed ways to address those misperceptions. Government authorities reiterated that there was no state religion in the country.

An official with Institute of Global Engagement (IGE), a U.S.-based religious freedom NGO, said conditions for religious freedom had improved steadily in the 17 years since he first came to the country. He said the MOHA had taken on a more assertive role in promoting religious freedom during the year, but there were still many people in the government who believed Buddhism should be the only religion in the country, and the concept of religious freedom, while accepted by the central government, was virtually unknown to the average citizen.

According to government sources, due to staff turnover at the provincial and local levels, three years after Decree 315 became law there were still some officials unfamiliar with its provisions and proper application. The LFND and the MOHA stated they continued to visit areas where religious freedom abuses had reportedly taken place to instruct local authorities on government policy and law, and frequently traveled beyond the capital 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 their obligations under the constitution and the right of all citizens to believe or not to believe in religion. During these sessions, central authorities provided training to provincial LFND and MOHA officials on Decree 315 and other laws governing religion and held workshops with local authorities and religious leaders that reviewed the basic tenets of Buddhism, Christianity, the Baha’i Faith, and Islam. The MOHA, with support from IGE, held religious freedom workshops in 12 of 18 provinces during the year. The

government fully funded one workshop, and religious groups contributed some funding for the remaining workshops.

In March the MOHA organized a seminar on religion and the rule of law with financial support from the IGE. Representatives from all 18 provinces attended the two-day seminar. Speakers discussed concepts of international religious freedom, as well as aspects of Decree 315 and how it should be implemented.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to religious leaders, most disputes among religious communities occurred in villages and rural areas, where the central government's ability to enforce national laws was limited.

One official with the LEC stated that strong growth in church membership in recent years exacerbated tensions within some communities and brought increased scrutiny by villagers who remained wary of any religion other than Buddhism. The official said in Savannakhet Province church membership grew from approximately 16,000 at the beginning of 2017 to more than 23,000 in 2018. He said this rapid growth led to local conflicts between new adherents of Christianity and their majority non-Christian neighbors. Similarly, LEC leaders said rapid growth in the number of Christians in Vientiane Province, which totaled approximately 18,000 members, was evidence of increased religious freedom but also led to increased tensions with local communities.

Religious leaders said in some rural areas there were reports that villagers threatened to expel Christians from the village if they did not renounce their faith. According to the Christian advocacy NGO Open Doors USA, "Abandoning Buddhism or animist beliefs is seen as a betrayal of family members and the community, which fuels the perception that Christians essentially excommunicate themselves from the Buddhist-animist community. Consequently, believers are persecuted by their immediate and/or extended family (usually one Laotian household is composed of three generations under one roof) and by local authorities who often stir up the community."

According to provincial authorities and a U.S. citizen who monitors religious activities in the country, in May three families in Houaphan Province who were members of the LEC were expelled from their village by siblings who were animists. Authorities said while some of the siblings were animist and some Christian, the dispute was not connected to religion.

In many villages, disputes of all kinds (including religious disputes) were referred to government-sanctioned village mediation units. According to Christian group leaders, these units often encouraged Christians to compromise their beliefs by accommodating local Buddhist or animist community practices. In dealing with local disputes regarding religious issues, officials at MOHA said they first waited for local authorities to resolve an issue before getting involved. One MOHA official said the ministry did not have the resources to respond to every conflict.

Christians said burial practices remained a contentious issue. A leader of the Seventh-day Adventist Church said in rural areas many animists believe the Christian practice of burying the dead, rather than the Buddhist tradition of cremating, would bring disharmony to the village and conflict with the village spirits. In some rural areas, Christians said that they were not allowed to use public cemeteries and were not given land for separate cemeteries, and that they had to resort to burying their dead on farms or in backyards. The official said in some areas the church was trying to buy land for cemeteries so members would not have to use public cemeteries.

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 youths. Baha'i groups conducted religious training for children and adult members. The Catholic Church operated a seminary in Khammouane Province. The Muslim community offered limited educational training. Several private preschools and English-language schools received support from foreign religious groups of various denominations.

A spokesperson for the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization said the relationship between the country and Buddhism was akin to that of a person and his or her shadow. He said the long history of Buddhism in the country created a common understanding among the country's ethnic groups and a strong level of trust with both the government and the LPRP.

Several religious groups said they provided donations without regard to the religious affiliation of the recipients after floods displaced hundreds in the southern region of the country in August.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials regularly advocated for religious freedom with a range of government officials, including those associated with implementing Decree 315, to ensure government activities were consistent with the country's obligations under the ICCPR and other international instruments to which it was a signatory. In exchanges with the MOHA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Assembly's Department of Ethnic and Religious Affairs, and the LFND Religious Affairs Department, embassy officials discussed the need for swift and appropriate resolution of specific cases of harassment. Embassy officers raised concerns with appropriate officials about cumbersome procedures, including registration, obtaining advance permission to hold religious services and travel for religious purposes, as well as the government's efforts to implement Decree 315 at the provincial and local levels.

Embassy officials regularly met with representatives from different religious and advocacy groups, including the LEC, the Seventh-day Adventists, the Church of Jesus Christ, the Methodist Church, the Catholic Church, the Islamic Association of Laos, the Baha'i community, and the IGE to address religious equality concerns such as registration, Decree 315 administrative requirements, land acquisition, and tensions with local Buddhist and animist communities.

In September the embassy organized a five-day visit by an American gospel music group. The group performed at several venues, including a concert at the National Cultural Hall, attended by more than 1,250 people. The embassy partnered with the Metta Dhamma Project, an organization that promotes cultural aspects of the Buddhist faith, to host the country's first-ever "interfaith musical exchange" at an auditorium next to a prominent Buddhist temple in Vientiane. The Metta Dhamma Project brought in Lao performers who sang, danced, and conducted religious rituals, while the American group performed traditional gospel songs. Government representatives and leaders from various religious organizations attended. The Ambassador spoke at the event about the importance of religious freedom, and these remarks were echoed by Bounthavy Phonethasine, Deputy Director of the Religious Department at the LFND. Maha Ves Masenay, vice president of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization, formally welcomed the gospel group and praised the interfaith music exchange. The embassy highlighted the event on its Facebook page.