

LAOS 2022 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, with Buddhism paramount. Decree 315, rather than law, sets forth rules for religious practice and minimum land requirements for building houses of worship and defines the government as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities.

Religious leaders continued to state that 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, discriminating against and sometimes expelling followers of minority religious groups, particularly Christians, for refusing to renounce their faith. Media outlets reported Christian convert and Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) Pastor Sy Sengmanee was found badly beaten and dead on October 23, several days after a villager witnessed his abduction in Khammouane Province. In March, authorities pressured a Christian family to take down social media posts in which they described experiencing violence in their Buddhist-majority village for practicing “a foreign religion” and criticized the village chief for his role in the violence. No new groups successfully registered with the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA). While some unregistered groups said they could practice without interference in house churches, others said local authorities in many areas considered group worship in homes illegal.

Religious leaders continued to state that Decree 315 established onerous requirements sometimes used to restrict travel for religious purposes. Christian groups said burdensome property requirements hindered construction or renovation of houses of worship in some areas. In August, the government approved construction of a Seventh-day Adventist church in Champasak Province, despite the group’s owning land there that was smaller than the legal minimum requirement. Members of minority religions continued to conceal their religious affiliation in order to join and avoid discrimination in the ruling Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP), the government, and the military. Authorities stated

some local officials did not apply Decree 315 correctly and that the government continued to train provincial officials to implement Decree 315 and other laws governing religion. They said, however, that conducting training in remote areas was difficult.

According to government and religious group sources, tensions continued in rural areas among animists, Buddhists, and growing Christian communities. Religious leaders said there were reports that villagers threatened to expel Christians from their villages if they did not renounce their faith. Reports continued of villagers preventing the burial of Christians in public cemeteries.

U.S. embassy officials regularly raised specific religious freedom cases and issues regarding cumbersome regulations, including registration procedures, with the government and LPRP officials and continued to encourage the use of open dialogue and conflict resolution to settle them. In official meetings, the Ambassador promoted religious freedom as a universal basic human right and offered U.S. support to the government as it began the process of codifying the provisions of Decree 315 into law. Embassy officials regularly met with leaders from a wide variety of religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to understand better the problems faced by members of minority religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.7 million (midyear 2022). 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” (a category which includes those with animist beliefs, who do not fit into other categories), and the remaining 2.1 percent belong to other religions or did not state an answer. 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), an organization associated with the 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, Thai Daeng, 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 report, *Religious Freedom in the World 2021*, issued by the Catholic Church-affiliated international NGO Aid to the Church in Need, Christians comprise 2.8 percent of the population. The Catholic Church estimates its membership at 100,000, the LEC estimates its membership at more than 200,000, the Methodist Church estimates its membership at 4,700 members, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church estimates its adherents at 2,500. Muslim community leaders estimate the community has approximately 1,000 members, and the Baha'i Faith estimates its community has approximately 2,200 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 clergy of other religions to participate in activities that are beneficial to the country and people.” It prohibits all acts that create division among religious groups and classes of persons. The government officially recognizes four religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Baha'i Faith.

Decree 315, which is not law but sets forth rules for religious practice, includes “respect for the religious rights and freedom” of both believers and nonbelievers. The decree sets forth rules and regulations concerning the governance and protection of religious activities for clergy, teachers of religion, believers, and religious groups, with the stated goals to preserve and promote national culture, increase solidarity among members of religious groups, and “preserve and develop the nation.” The decree specifies 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. 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 religious leaders 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 must obtain provincial-level approval; and groups operating in multiple villages are required to obtain district-level approval. If a group seeks 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 approval from village authorities. 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 that nearly all aspects of religious practice – such as congregating, holding religious services, travel of 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 activity 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 among tribes and religions, including threats to the lives, property, 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 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. While sponsorship does not include government funding, it may include in-kind contributions or having high-level leaders join a Buddhist activity to help generate increased financial contributions from other sources.

The decree requires Buddhist clergy to hold identification cards, and clergy of other religions are required to hold certificates issued by their own religious organizations to confirm they have received legitimate religious training.

Per Decree 315, 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, or 1.24 acres) of land to construct a place of worship. MOHA officials at all levels must approve plans for any maintenance, restoration, or construction activities at religious facilities in advance. Local authorities may provide input regarding the building, care, and maintenance of religious facilities, present their findings to their respective provincial governors and city mayors for consideration, and subsequently ask MOHA officials 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 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. MOES states that 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 group. These schools may organize religious activities but may not provide religion courses as part of the formal curriculum. Students of other religions may opt out of those activities.

Individuals entering the clergy for more than three months require prior 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 first approve. The shorter period stipulations are particularly relevant to Buddhists because every Buddhist male is expected to enter the monkhood at least once in his life, often for fewer than three months.

MOES and MOHA must approve the travel abroad of clergy and religious teachers for specialized studies. Students going abroad for any kind of study (including religious studies) generally require prior MOES approval. Domestic religious organizations that also conduct religious activities overseas must receive approval from the appropriate geographical MOHA level.

According to the law, the LFND may educate and meet with religious leaders, clergy, teachers, and members to ensure compliance with laws and regulations, to emphasize their part in reducing any ethnic and religious tensions, and to underscore that religious groups should “contribute to the development of the nation.”

The government controls the distribution of written materials for religious audiences. Decree 315 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 MOHA must approve religious texts or other materials before they are imported. MOHA may require religious groups to certify the imported materials are truly representative of their respective 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.

A government decree sets forth principles and rules for “ethnic management.” One section of the decree provides for protection and preservation of traditional burial practices.

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 continued to state that authorities in urban areas and in some districts had a fuller understanding of laws governing religious activities, compared with authorities in rural areas, including provisions of Decree 315. Consequently, restrictions on religious freedom outside legal parameters remained more prevalent in rural areas. Some minority religious group leaders also stated both central and local government officials at times cited Decree 315 (or its predecessor, Decree 92) and social harmony as reasons for continuing to restrict and monitor certain religious activity, especially the activities of new or small Christian organizations whose adherents belonged to minority ethnic groups. Religious leaders continued to state that many local officials were still unaware of the content of Decree 315 and how to properly apply it. As a result, religious minority leaders in rural areas continued to be targets of threats and intimidation by local authorities, which sometimes led to detention or arrest.

According to Radio Free Asia (RFA), LEC Pastor Sy Sengmanee was found badly beaten and dead on October 23, several days after a villager witnessed unidentified individuals abducting him near Donkeo village, Nakai District, Khammouane Province. The pastor had converted from animism to Christianity in 2015. Authorities arrested him in 2018 for holding religious meetings in his house and pressured him to sign a document renouncing his faith; he refused, and they released him from detention after three days but required him to pay a fine. Local villagers said the pastor continued to face intimidation in the months leading up to his abduction and that two men believed to be district authorities were seen visiting him a few days before his body was found. LFND officials said local authorities opened an investigation into the case. Government officials also said the government held Decree 315 training activities in Khammouane Province before the end of the year, but that the training did not include officials from Nakai District.

According to local sources, seven Christians from two households in Pasing village, Ta-Oesy District, Salavan Province, remained homeless and living with relatives since 2020, after villagers destroyed their homes when they refused to renounce their faith. Local sources stated local authorities and officials from MOHA had not yet made efforts to resolve the problem and assist the families.

The LEC reported that during the year, local authorities in Talou village, Ta Oi District, Salavan Province, allowed two Christian families to return and rebuild their homes, although without the government assistance they were promised. In 2021, villagers and local authorities forced the two households, along with a third, comprising in total 14 Christians, from their homes and expelled them from the village for refusing to renounce their faith. Authorities had not given the third household permission to return as of year's end.

In March, RFA reported authorities pressured a family belonging to the Evangelical Church of Savannakhet to take down social media posts in which they described experiencing violence and criticized the village chief for leading the violence. The family stated Buddhist villagers in Phalanxay District had attacked them during a funeral and forcibly displaced them for practicing a "foreign religion." The family posted videos showing villagers hitting the family patriarch's coffin with sticks and striking mourners with clubs in December 2021 and burning their house in Dong Savanh village on February 9. According to a local Christian leader, authorities said they would help the family, but only if the family took down the posts or altered them to remove criticism of the village chief for playing a leading role in the fire. The family refused. One member of the family told RFA, "Right now, we still live in the forest outside the village. Nothing has been resolved."

Local media outlets and numerous Christian groups reported increased intimidation and pressure on Christians to convert, or in some cases to reconvert, to Buddhism or animism, especially in Luang Namtha, Sekong, Khammouane, and Oudomxay Provinces. According to Seventh-day Adventists, village authorities in Kok Phoung Neua village, Thateng District, Sekong Province, threatened members of the church with expulsion from the village if they did not sign a document renouncing their faith. Before they converted to Christianity, some of these individuals were recognized as LPRP members and served as village security personnel. After they converted, however, the LPRP ignored their previous

status. Authorities did not allow them to use the village electricity, water supply, or cemetery and refused to process the applications necessary for their children to attend school.

MOHA officials stated that no new religious groups registered during the year and that review of registration applications already in process continued. According to religious leaders, the MOHA requested some Christian groups seeking registration, such as the Church of Jesus Christ and the Methodist Church, to consider registering under one of the Christian groups that were already recognized, namely the Catholic Church, LEC, or Seventh-day Adventists. The religious leaders said this request may have been the result of the government not having sufficient staff or resources to process pending applications.

Religious groups reported problems obtaining the proper titles for parcels of land for places of worship. MOHA officials required groups to place land titles in the name of the religious group rather than in the name of a member or religious leader. Religious groups, however, reported experiencing lengthy delays with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment's Department of Land when they sought to change their titles.

The local leader of the Church of Jesus Christ said the church continued to seek registration, a process begun in 2021, but that during the year, it was unable to comply with the MOHA's request that it first transfer a land title from an individual to the church before resubmitting a registration application.

According to a MOHA official, the ministry continued to meet with unregistered groups to answer questions about the registration process but did so infrequently. MOHA continued to hold quarterly meetings with all registered religious groups, which, religious leaders said, increased their opportunities to express concerns and report on their groups' activities.

Although the law prohibits members of religious groups not registered with MOHA or the LFND from practicing their faith, members of several such groups said they continued to do so quietly and without interference, often in house churches.

While religious groups stated that Decree 315 further clarified processes for meeting administrative requirements, some requirements mandated by the decree would be burdensome and restrictive if fully enforced. Among these were requirements to submit detailed travel plans of group leaders and requests for government approval in advance in order to hold basic religious services or activities, which some religious groups said the government did not fully or uniformly enforce. Religious leaders reported various incidents throughout the country related to the requirement that they seek permission prior to travel. Some religious leaders stated authorities sometimes detained Christians who were traveling without permission to attend religious events outside their regular locales. Several minority religious group leaders also continued to report that they often traveled within the country without prior government approval because obtaining permission took too much time and officials often ultimately denied the requests. MOHA officials acknowledged the challenges related to these travel requirements and stated that they would address them in planned draft legislation that would ultimately replace Decree 315.

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

According to Catholic Church officials, the government routinely surveilled their members and leaders, reportedly to monitor for and protect against foreign influence. Church leaders also said the government often monitored foreigners attending services at the Sacred Heart Cathedral in Vientiane.

Christian religious leaders said the government continued to strictly enforce a prohibition, including on foreigners, against proselytizing in public areas. The government did not restrict proselytizing inside recognized places of worship. Both the Church of Jesus Christ and Seventh-day Adventists reported they had missionaries in the country but that the government restricted their activities to teaching English and promoting good health practices, such as hygiene and sanitation. The government did not permit missionaries to engage in religious discussions with non-members of their religious group outside their places of worship. Representatives of the Church of Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church said they relied on informal person-to-person communication to attract new members.

Authorities reported prisoners and detainees could observe some personal religious practices, but authorities did not provide facilities for communal worship.

Authorities continued to control imports of religious materials, but several groups said they could access most religious texts and documents online. MOHA officials again said they coordinated with religious groups to review imported materials to ensure these were in accordance with the organization's beliefs. Due to these requirements, sources from the Baha'i community and other groups again said they chose to produce and print their own religious documents in the country.

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.

Some sources said the legal requirement that a religious organization own 5,000 square meters (54,000 square feet, or 1.24 acres) of land to build a church or temple limited the ability of some smaller congregations, which lacked sufficient resources, to obtain a space of that size. Seventh-day Adventist Church leaders said the largest Seventh-day Adventist Church, located in Vientiane, sat on less than 3,300 square meters (35,000 square feet). The church purchased land in Champasak Province, just outside the provincial capital city of Pakse, to construct a new building, and, although the area was that smaller than the legal minimum requirement, in August, the government granted approval to proceed.

Several minority religious groups continued to report restrictions on land acquisition hindered building and renovating places of worship, although the LFND Religious Affairs Department stated it continued to emphasize that designated church structures should replace house churches whenever possible. The Seventh-day Adventist Church continued to attribute the large number of house churches to difficulties in obtaining enough land to meet Decree 315 requirements.

Many religious leaders also stated they continued to experience lengthy delays in obtaining permits for church construction and generally received no response to requests. According to a church representative, the Catholic Church had been waiting since 2007 to receive approval to renovate a church building in Kaoyod

village, Chanthabouly District, Vientiane Capital. During this time, government officials seized a building on the same property, which the government used as office space for a Chinese construction project. Although construction was almost complete at year's end, the church stated the government had yet to communicate when it intended to return the building as promised.

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

Leaders of the Catholic and Seventh-day Adventist Churches said Christian officials were obliged to conceal their religion in order to join the LPRP, government, or military and to avoid facing discrimination in these institutions. Some non-Buddhists identified as Buddhist in their family book (a household registration document). Seventh-day Adventist officials continued to state there was a "hidden law" mandating that a citizen could not be both a Christian and a member of the LPRP. Members of other minority religious groups said it was difficult for their members to join the government, advance to higher-level positions, or become village chiefs. As of year's end, there were no non-Buddhists and non-animists in government leadership positions.

Several religious groups continued to recommend the government devote more resources to implementing Decree 315 and to promoting religious freedom at district and province levels. Central government officials stated they continued nationwide programs to disseminate and implement Decree 315 consistently in an attempt to protect minority religious groups, but, as in years past, this was particularly challenging in isolated areas and that resource constraints limited the number of engagements they could conduct each year. Authorities stated they collected only limited data during Decree 315 training sessions, while acknowledging these sessions brought together officials and religious leaders from a much smaller geographical area than a full assessment would have.

MOHA officials reported they planned to begin revising and converting Decree 315 into law in 2023, with the intent of submitting a draft law for National Assembly review and approval by 2025.

LFND and MOHA officials stated they continued to visit those areas where a greater number of religious freedom abuses had reportedly taken place to instruct local authorities on government policy and law, including Decree 315, and that they held workshops with local authorities and religious leaders that reviewed the basic tenets of Buddhism, Christianity, the Baha'i Faith, and Islam. During the year, MOHA and LFND officials, with support from the local NGO SANTI Corps (affiliated with the Institute for Global Engagement), organized six provincial training sessions on Decree 315 and four training workshops to bring local authorities and religious leaders together to promote interfaith tolerance and understanding.

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.

LEC leaders continued to say growth in church membership exacerbated tensions within some communities, particularly among villagers who were wary of minority religions. According to numerous sources, majority non-Christian neighbors often harassed new Christian members in these villages for abandoning their traditions, typically Buddhist or animist.

Religious leaders said that in some rural areas, villagers threatened to expel Christians from their villages if they did not renounce their faith. According to local sources, villagers from Kengkian village, Kaleum District, Sekong Province, threatened to force Christian families from their homes for refusing to renounce their faith, and due to these threats, some of the individuals reverted to Buddhism or animism.

In many villages, religious disputes continued to be referred to government-sanctioned village mediation units composed of private citizens. 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, MOHA and LFND officials stated they first waited for local authorities to resolve an issue before becoming involved. MOHA and LFND officials continued to state their ministries did not have the resources to respond to every conflict.

According to Christian religious leaders, burial practices remained a contentious issue. In some rural areas, Christians said they were not allowed to use public cemeteries, were not given land for separate cemeteries, and had to resort to burying the remains on farms or in backyards. According to the LEC, following his killing, local officials did not permit Pastor Sy Sengmanee to be buried in a cemetery in his home district of Nakai, so his church buried him in a cemetery belonging to the LEC in Thakhek, 60 kilometers (37 miles) away.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials continued to regularly advocate religious freedom with a range of government officials, including those central- and local-level officials responsible for implementing Decree 315, to ensure compliance of the government's activities with the country's obligations under the ICCPR and other international instruments to which it is a signatory. Embassy officers raised concerns with government officials regarding specific religious freedom cases, Christians being expelled from their villages due to their faith, obstacles to religious groups registering, and cumbersome procedures for obtaining 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 continued to encourage the use of open dialogue and conflict resolution to settle religious freedom issues. The Ambassador also promoted religious freedom as a universal human right during interfaith events he hosted for government officials, religious actors, and members of the diplomatic community.

Embassy officials inquired about the government's plans to convert the provisions of Decree 315 into law and continued to track developments in the process, seeking potential opportunities to provide U.S. technical assistance. In discussions with the LFND vice president in April and September, the Ambassador offered to make U.S. experts available for consultations.

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

The embassy continued to amplify messages promoting religious freedom on its Facebook page, which had more than 415,000 followers. In January, the embassy recognized National Religious Freedom Day through social media postings.