

THAILAND 2023 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution “prohibits discrimination based on religious belief” and protects religious liberty as long as the exercise of religious freedom is not “harmful to the security of the State.” The law officially recognizes five religious groups: Buddhists, Muslims, Brahmin-Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians. The Ministry of Justice allows the practice of sharia as a separate legal process outside the national civil code for Muslim residents of the “Deep South” – described as the four southernmost provinces near the Malaysian border, including three with a Malay Muslim majority – for family law, including inheritance. Foreign missionaries, including Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh, are permitted to register and operate in the country, subject to a quota for various religious groups set by the Religious Affairs Department (RAD) of the Ministry of Culture.

Authorities continued to use emergency decree and martial law provisions in effect in the Deep South that gave military, police, and civilian authorities powers to restrict certain basic rights, including extending pretrial detention and expanding warrantless searches. Authorities delegated certain internal security powers to the armed forces. The Muslim community in the Deep South continued to express frustration with perceived discriminatory treatment by security forces and what they described as a judicial system that lacked adequate checks and balances. According to the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Deep South Watch, authorities conducted a total of 67 raid and search operations against Muslim insurgents during the year. The NGO Duay Jai continued to express

concerns regarding security forces collecting DNA from suspected insurgents and their family members through intimidation and force.

There were no reports that foreign individuals or groups detained in violation of immigration law were targeted on the basis of their religious beliefs. The country's law does not recognize UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) asylum-seeker or refugee status. Authorities detained for immigration violations some foreign groups claiming religious persecution in their countries of origin, whether or not they reportedly asserted UNHCR-approved status. UNHCR officials reported the majority of asylum seekers and refugees, including those in detention, were not at risk of refoulement.

Several dozen Uyghur Muslim asylum seekers from China reportedly remained in immigrant detention, most held since 2015. The Falun Dafa Information Center reported multiple Falun Gong practitioners had been in immigration detention since 2014. There were reports of detention of Rohingya Muslims, including youth, fleeing religious and ethnic persecution in Burma. In March, immigration authorities in Pattaya detained 63 Chinese Christians from Shenzhen, and in April, facilitated their departure for agreed legal resettlement in a third country. On May 9, police raided Wat Pa Thammakhiri, a Buddhist temple in Nakhon Ratchasima, uncovered gold and jewelry and ultimately arrested seven monks and two drivers on charges of embezzling approximately 300 million baht (\$8.7 million) from donations received since 2020. Some Buddhist groups continued to express frustration with perceived special allowances for Muslims. The government responded by opening an existing assistance program to students from all faiths.

There were continued attacks against both Buddhists and Muslims in the Deep South, where religious and ethnic identity are closely linked in a

longstanding separatist conflict. According to Deep South Watch, violence in the Deep South resulted in at least 109 deaths – 82 Muslims, 23 Buddhists, and four individuals with unidentified religious affiliation – compared with 88 deaths – 57 Muslims, 28 Buddhists, and three with unidentified religious affiliation – in the same period in 2022. Insurgents reportedly conducted six simultaneous attacks at the end of Ramadan, resulting in multiple injuries.

With government representatives, U.S. embassy officials regularly advocated greater protection of refugees and asylum seekers, specifically including those fleeing religious persecution and violence. The Ambassador and embassy officials regularly met with religious leaders and scholars, international NGOs, academics, and representatives of faith-based organizations to discuss religious pluralism and tolerance as well as the plight of refugees fleeing religious violence. The Ambassador and other embassy officials frequently visited religious sites of local significance and engaged in discussion with religious leaders on issues related to tolerance and diversity. The embassy awarded multiple grants to NGOs in the Deep South for projects focusing on religious and ethnic diversity and inclusion, youth engagement, community building, and digital literacy/disinformation training. Embassy officials led quarterly virtual conversations with faith leaders, bringing together academics, religious leaders, community organizers, and youth influencers to create new connections, share perspectives on religious freedom issues, and consider future collaboration. On March 29, the Ambassador visited the Deep South and hosted an iftar with local religious leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the country's total population at 69.8 million (midyear 2023). In December 2021, the Department of Religious Affairs reported the population is 92.5 percent Buddhist, 5.4 percent Muslim, and 1.2 percent Christian. Other groups include animists, Confucians, Hindus, Jews, Sikhs, and Taoists.

Most Buddhists incorporate Hindu and animist practices into their worship. The Buddhist clergy (*sangha*) consists of two main schools of Theravada Buddhism: Mahanikaya and Dhammayuttika. The former is older and more prevalent within the monastic community.

Islam is the dominant religion in three of the southern provinces (Narathiwat, Yala, and Pattani) near the Malaysian border. The majority of Muslims there are ethnic Malay, but the Muslim population nationwide also includes descendants of immigrants from South Asia, China, Cambodia, and Indonesia, as well as ethnic Thai. RAD statistics indicate that 99 percent of Muslims are Sunni, with a small Shia community split between Bangkok and the province of Nakhon Si Thammarat.

The majority of ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese practice either Mahayana or Theravada Buddhism. Many ethnic Chinese, as well as members of the Mien hill tribe, also practice forms of Taoism. The majority of Christians are ethnic Chinese and are also represented among ethnic tribal groups in the north. More than half of the Christian community is Roman Catholic.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution “prohibits discrimination based on religious belief.” It states that all persons are equal before the law regardless of religious belief and allows all persons to profess, observe, or practice any religion of their choice as long as the exercise of these freedoms is not “harmful to the security of the State.” The constitution empowers the state to patronize and protect Buddhism as well as other religions, but it also provides for special promotion of Theravada Buddhism through education, the propagation of its principles, and the establishment of measures and mechanisms “to prevent the desecration of Buddhism in any form.”

A special order issued by the former military government in 2016 and still in effect provides for the state’s promotion and protection of “all recognized religions” in the country, but it mandates that all state agencies monitor the “right teaching” of all religions to ensure they are not “distorted to upset social harmony.” Defaming or insulting Buddhism and Buddhist clergy is specifically prohibited by law. Violators may face up to one year’s imprisonment, fines of up to 20,000 baht (\$580), or both. The penal code prohibits the insult or disturbance of religious places or services of all officially recognized religious groups. Penalties range from imprisonment for one to seven years, a fine of 20,000 to 140,000 baht (\$580 to \$4,100), or both.

The law officially recognizes five religious groups: Buddhists, Muslims, Brahmin-Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians. While there is no official state religion, the constitution requires the King to be Buddhist and declares that he is the “upholder of religions.”

Groups associated with one of the five officially recognized religious groups may register to receive state benefits that include access to state subsidies, exemption from property and income taxes, and preferential allocation of

resident visas for the registered organization's foreign officials. These benefits are subsidized under various laws and regulations across multiple agencies. Registration as a religious group is not mandatory, and religious groups may operate without government interference, whether they are officially registered or recognized or not. The RAD is responsible for registering new religious groups, except for Buddhist groups, which are overseen by the National Office of Buddhism (NOB), an independent state agency under direct supervision of the Prime Minister. Buddhist religious clerics who hold administrative and senior ecclesiastical posts are compensated by the NOB, while similar support for Islamic religious leaders is supplied by the Sub-Department of Provincial Administration, Ministry of the Interior.

The RAD may register a new religious group outside one of the five recognized religious groups when it meets the following qualifications: the national census indicates the group has at least 5,000 adherents, possesses a uniquely recognizable theology, is not politically active, and obtains formal approval in a RAD-organized meeting of representatives from the concerned ministries and the five recognized umbrella religious groups. To register with the RAD, a religious group's leader also must submit documentation on the group's objectives and procedures, any relationship to a foreign country, a list of executive members and senior officials, and locations of administrative, religious, and teaching sites. The government has not recognized any new religious groups outside the five umbrella groups, and the RAD reports that no applications were received during the year. Despite the lack of formal legal recognition or registration, civil society organizations report that unregistered religious groups operate freely and that the government's practice of not recognizing or registering new religious groups does not restrict their activities.

The constitution prohibits Buddhist priests, novices, monks, and other clergy from voting in elections, serving in the House of Representatives or Senate, or taking public positions on political matters. Christian clergy may vote in elections as long as they are not wearing formal religious attire. Except for the Chularatchamontri (Grand Mufti), imams are not regarded as priests or clergy and thus may vote in elections and assume political positions.

The Sangha Supreme Council serves as Thai Buddhism's governing clerical body. The King has unilateral authority to appoint or remove members from the Sangha Supreme Council irrespective of the monk's rank and without consent or consultation with the Supreme Patriarch, whom the King also has legal authority to appoint.

The penal code bars any activity that insults or defames a religion, whether directed at a sacred object or place of worship, and it specifies offenders shall be subject to two to seven years' imprisonment or a fine of 2,000 to 14,000 baht (\$58-\$406), or both.

The law requires religious education classes for all students at both the primary and secondary levels; students may not opt out. The curriculum must contain information regarding the five recognized umbrella religious groups. Students who wish to pursue in-depth studies of a particular religion may study at private religious schools and may transfer credits to public schools. Individual schools, working in conjunction with their local administrative boards, are authorized to arrange additional religious studies courses. There are approximately 350 Catholic- and Protestant-run primary and secondary schools, whose curricula and registration are overseen by the Ministry of Education. The Sangha Supreme Council and the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand, respectively, create the Buddhist and Islamic portions of the religious education curricula required in public schools.

The Central Islamic Council of Thailand, whose members are Muslims appointed by royal proclamation, advises the Ministries of Education and Interior on Islamic issues. The government provides some funding for Islamic educational institutions, the construction of mosques, and Hajj participation. In the Deep South, the Southern Border Provinces Administration Center usually pays for Hajj travel with funding received from the central government. There are several hundred primary and secondary Islamic schools throughout the country. There are four options for students to obtain Islamic education in the Deep South: government-subsidized schools offering Islamic education in conjunction with the national curriculum; private Islamic schools offering non-Quranic subjects such as foreign languages (Arabic and English) but whose curriculum is not subject to government approval; private Islamic day schools offering Islamic education according to their own curriculum to students of all ages; and after-school religious courses for children in grades one through six, often held in mosques.

The Ministry of Justice allows the practice of sharia as a separate legal process outside the national civil code for Muslim residents of the Deep South for issues involving family law, including inheritance. Provincial courts apply this law and a sharia expert advises the judge. The law officially provides the administrative structure of Muslim communities in the Deep South, including the process for selecting the Chularatchamontri, whom the King appoints as the state advisor on Islamic affairs.

The RAD sets a quota for the number of foreign missionaries permitted to register and operate in the country: 1,357 Christian, six Muslim, 20 Hindu, and 41 Sikh. Registration confers some benefits, such as longer visa validity. Representatives of the five officially recognized religious groups may apply

for one-year missionary visas that are renewable. Foreign missionaries from other religious groups are not eligible for missionary visas and must obtain tourist visas, which have a 90-day validity. Religious groups reported that being unregistered was not a significant barrier to foreign missionary activity, and many missionaries from unregistered groups worked in the country without government interference.

The immigration law does not recognize refugee status granted by UNHCR to individuals from other countries, and the law does not make enforcement exceptions for refugees or asylum seekers, including those claiming persecution on religious grounds. Such persons are subject to arrest and detention on the same basis as any persons without legal immigration status.

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

Government Practices

On September 21, the Thai and Malaysian prime ministers, along with government officials and delegates from both countries, met and discussed the peace process and development of the country's southern border region. The Malaysian government moderated talks between the national government and the largest insurgent group, the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN). BRN in Thailand agreed in February on a peace plan roadmap, but in the following month, BRN suspended talks pending formation of a new government after elections. As of year's end, talks had not resumed.

Muslim leaders in the Deep South continued to express frustration with perceived discriminatory treatment by security forces and what they said

was a judicial system lacking adequate checks and balances. Duay Jai continued to express concerns regarding security forces collecting DNA from suspected insurgents and their family members through intimidation and force. In October, Duay Jai reported authorities collected DNA from a 67-year-old woman after investigators searched her house and questioned her concerning her son, who was not at home. Investigators claimed the DNA was collected to determine if the son had been involved in a previous antigovernment incident. The NGO Cross Cultural Foundation reported it received 21 complaints that authorities coerced or forced individuals into providing DNA during the year.

According to Deep South Watch, authorities conducted 67 raid and search operations against Muslim insurgents during the year.

Authorities continued to use emergency decree and martial law provisions in effect in the Deep South since 2005 and 2004, respectively, that gave military, police, and civilian authorities significant powers to restrict certain basic rights, including extending pretrial detention and expanding warrantless searches. Authorities delegated certain internal security powers to the armed forces, often resulting in accusations by Muslims of unfair treatment, such as disproportionate searches of vehicles with Muslim passengers.

According to human rights groups and media reports, some refugees and asylum seekers were fleeing religious persecution in their countries of origin. According to UNHCR, the country's law considers refugees and asylum seekers who entered the country without valid visas to be illegal aliens and thus technically subject to possible arrest, detention, and deportation, regardless of whether they had registered with UNHCR. Authorities, however, generally did not deport persons holding valid UNHCR

asylum-seeker or refugee status. UNHCR also reported that the majority of asylum seekers and refugees, including those in detention, were not at risk of refoulement.

The government generally allowed UNHCR access to detained asylum seekers and refugees. In some cases, UNHCR-recognized refugees, including those fleeing religious persecution, reported staying in immigration detention centers (IDCs) in crowded conditions for multiple years. In many cases, the government placed mothers and children in shelters in accordance with a policy of ceasing detention of migrant children. Such shelters provided greater space than IDCs but still restricted freedom of movement, in some cases severely and in others minimally. According to international NGOs, however, there were multiple instances during the year of the government detaining refugee and asylum-seeking minors, including Rohingya Muslims fleeing religious and ethnic persecution in Burma, in IDCs or local police stations.

On May 10, a statement released by the Falun Dafa Information Center reported multiple Falun Gong practitioners in Thailand from China had been held in IDCs since 2014. The practitioners were held for immigration violations, not due to their religious identity. They reportedly requested UNHCR asylee status, which the country, however, does not recognize as a basis for legal immigration.

In November, according to media sources, immigration authorities arrested more than a dozen Christian ethnic Montagnards who fled Vietnam, some of whom reportedly were UNHCR-recognized refugees or asylum seekers. The arrests came against a backdrop of a reported rise in illegal migrants from Vietnam moving to the country. The immigration law does not make exceptions for UNHCR-recognized persons. There were no reports that the

arrests for immigration violations were due to the Montagnards' religious identity.

Media outlets and NGOs reported several dozen Uyghur Muslim asylum seekers from China remained in IDCs, most of them held since 2015. Humanitarian organizations reported Chinese authorities continued to pressure the government to return the Uyghurs to China. Humanitarian groups called on the government to allow these individuals to move to a country of their choosing where they would receive full refugee protections, and not be required to remain in an IDC.

On April 23, Human Rights Watch reported the death of Mattohti Mattursun (also known as Muhammad Tursun), an ethnic Uyghur asylum seeker who spent nine years in immigration detention. Mattursun reportedly died of liver failure. In February, Aziz Abdullah, another Uyghur detained at Suan Phlu IDC, died at age 49, reportedly of pneumonia. NGOs said the deaths resulted from poor conditions in immigration detention and authorities' refusal to provide adequate medical care.

Media outlets and NGOs reported in March that immigration authorities in Pattaya arrested 63 Chinese Christian members of the Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church, including dozens of children, for overstaying their visas and placed them in immigration detention. There were no reports that their religious beliefs played a role in the arrests and detentions. The group had applied with UNHCR for refugee status, and in April, immigration officials facilitated their departure for a third country.

The government continued to investigate and prosecute embezzlement crimes allegedly committed by senior Buddhist monks and government officials from the NOB.

On May 9, a police raid at Wat Pa Thammakhiri in Nakhon Ratchasima uncovered gold and jewelry valued at approximately 100 million baht (\$2.9 million). Authorities arrested five monks and a driver. By May 11, after further investigation, authorities arrested two more monks, and charged the seven monks and two drivers with embezzling approximately 300 million baht (\$8.7 million) from donations received by the temple since 2020.

Buddhist monks and temple authorities continued to comply with a 2018 Sangha Supreme Council order prohibiting the use of temple land for political activities or rallies, meetings, or seminars for purposes that violated the law or affected national security, social order, or public morals.

There was no update regarding the cases against Ai Phethong, secretary general of the Organization for Protection of Buddhism for Peace, who was convicted of defaming Muslim Prachachat Party leader Wan Muhamad Noor Matha. Wan Muhammad also filed civil lawsuits against Ai under different defamation acts for Ai's social media posts accusing the politician of leading an insurgency movement in the Deep South. At the end of the year, the criminal conviction remained on appeal, and the civil lawsuits were pending.

The law denying legal recognition to women monks (*bhikkhunis*) remained in effect despite the National Human Rights Commission's 2015 recommendation that the government amend it. The Sangha Supreme Council continued to prohibit women from becoming monks, and women wishing to join the monkhood usually travelled to India or Sri Lanka to be ordained. Of the 239,023 Buddhist clergy in the country, between 250 and 300 were women. Since a gender equality law exempts cases involving "compliance with religious principles," the government excluded bhikkhunis from gender equality protection. Government officials continued to neither

oppose nor support ordination of women, although they allowed bhikkhunis to practice and establish monasteries and temples. Without official recognition, however, monasteries led by women continued to be ineligible for any of the government benefits received by sanctioned Buddhist temples – primarily tax exemptions, free medical care, and subsidies for building construction and running social welfare programs. While male monks in the Deep South received government protection from verbal threats or physical attacks, bhikkhunis did not.

The only government-certified Islamic university in the Deep South, Fatoni University, continued to teach special curricula to Muslim students, including language instruction in Thai, English, Arabic, and Bahasa Malayu, and a mandatory peace-studies course, as well as to integrate religious principles into most course offerings. Three private Christian universities continued to provide religion courses as a component of their curricula and were open to students of any faith.

For the fiscal year ending September 30, the government allocated the RAD approximately 294 million baht (\$8.5 million) to support non-Buddhist initiatives, the same amount as allocated during the previous fiscal year. Approximately 261.4 million baht (\$7.6 million) of that allocation went to strategic planning for religious, artistic, and cultural development, including the promotion of interfaith cooperation through peace-building projects in the Deep South, the same as was allocated during the previous fiscal year. The RAD also received 1.1 million baht (\$32,000) for Deep South conflict resolution and development projects. The NOB, funded separately from the RAD, received 4.19 billion baht (\$122 million) in government funding, the same as the previous fiscal year.

Authorities continued to recognize elected provincial Islamic committees. Their responsibilities included providing advice to provincial governors on Islamic issues; deciding on the establishment, relocation, merger, and dissolution of mosques; appointing imams; and issuing announcements and approvals of Islamic religious activities. Committee members in the Deep South continued to report that some acted as advisers to government officials in dealing with the area's ethnonationalist and religious tensions.

Buddhist monks continued to work as missionaries, particularly in border areas among the country's tribal populations, and received some public funding. Buddhist missionaries worked in 279 communities and hill tribe regions in Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Sorn, Tak, and Petchaboon Provinces. Their focus was teaching Buddhism and community development. The Sangha Supreme Council required Buddhist missionaries to pass training and educational programs at Maha Makut Buddhist University or Maha Chulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya University before being appointed as missionaries. The government, per regulation, did not permit foreign monks to serve as Buddhist missionaries.

According to government statistics from 2022, there were 11 registered foreign missionary groups with visas that operated in the country: six Christian, one Muslim, two Hindu, and two Sikh groups. In 2023 the government reported there were 1,004 foreign missionaries: 949 Christian, 3 Muslim, 20 Hindu, and 32 Sikh. Some foreigners entered the country on tourist visas to conduct missionary work or activities in support of missionaries and were required to depart after 90 days.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continued to fill its special quota of 200 foreign missionaries, granted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

and National Security Council. On October 22, the group dedicated a new temple in Bangkok, its first in the country.

Some Buddhist groups continued to express frustration with perceived special allowances for Muslims, such as financial assistance, job placement, and lower testing standards for Muslim university students. On January 18, the government responded by expanding an existing assistance program, previously reserved for Muslim students, to include students from all faiths.

According to members of some Indigenous communities, the government encouraged preservation of their cultural and religious heritage and supported economic opportunities for Indigenous communities in showcasing their handicrafts, cultures, and traditions. Community members also stated authorities sometimes intervened to dictate which crafts to produce or required Indigenous cultural rituals or religious ceremonies be conducted on certain days of the week to maximize the size of the audience of tourists. Members of Indigenous communities reported being fairly compensated for land when asked to relocate due to development, but also said communities consequently no longer had access to the affected ancestral lands and therefore were unable to fully conduct ancestral religious rites and worship in those locations according to their traditions.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Since religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize the extent to which any incidents of violence related to the Malay Muslim insurgency were primarily based on religious identity. Reports of violent actions against religious groups and their members were largely confined to the Deep South, where the country's long-running

ethnonationalist insurgency falls along Buddhist/Muslim religious divides. This made it difficult at times to identify underlying causes of, and distinctions between, the insurgency, the government's counterinsurgency, intercommunal conflict with or without religious causes, and violence stemming from crime and drug abuse.

According to Deep South Watch, as of November 30, violence in the Deep South, including violence by security forces, resulted in at least 109 deaths. Among those killed were 82 Muslims, 23 Buddhists, and four individuals with unidentified religious affiliation. This was compared with 88 deaths, including 57 Muslims, 28 Buddhists, and three with unidentified religious affiliation in 2022. Observers attributed the increase in violence to heightened political tensions around the general election, persistently low levels of economic growth, and frustrations caused by aggressive security operations meant to root out insurgents and their supporters. Unlike in previous years, there were no reports of teachers being targeted.

On June 2, two paramilitary volunteers and three monks in Rueso District, Narathiwat Province, were injured by an improvised incendiary device. Authorities believed the paramilitary volunteers, who were providing protection for the monks, were the intended targets.

On May 12, one security official was killed and three others wounded in a roadside bomb attack in Yala Province. The initial inquiry revealed the attackers detonated the explosives as the patrol passed. Authorities believed insurgents were responsible for both the attack and a series of arson attacks on May 12 on cell phone towers across Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani Provinces.

On April 14, the last day of Ramadan, there were six simultaneous attacks in Narathiwat, Pattani, and Yala Provinces; there reportedly were multiple injuries. Authorities attributed the attacks to insurgents.

On January 3, media reported the Siam Kempinski Hotel in Bangkok had renamed its Hanuman bar the 1897 lounge in response to complaints from the Hindu community. The bar and its signature cocktail had been named after a Hindu deity, and the menu included numerous beef items.

Construction commenced on the world's largest statue of the Chinese Goddess of Mercy, Guan Yin, in Songkhla, a predominantly Muslim area. Unlike in the year prior, there were no large-scale protests against the construction.

The NGO Protect Buddhism for Peace continued its criticism of Islam, mainly via Facebook postings. The NGO also complained the Bhumjaithai Party's push for passage of the Deep South Peace Bill would benefit only the Muslim population.

Buddhist activists continued to campaign to designate Buddhism as the country's official religion. The platform of Pandin Dharma (Land of Dharma) Party, led by Buddhist nationalist Korn Meedee, advocated making Buddhism the state religion and called for the establishment of segregated, Buddhist-only communities in the country's three southern Muslim-majority provinces. The party competed in general elections in May but did not win any seats in parliament.

According to some Thai media commentators and scholars, Hamas' October 7 terrorist attack on Israel, including the hostage-taking and killing of dozens of Thai workers, caused a short-lived increase of anti-Muslim sentiment

online in Thailand, including some accusations that Thai Muslims who expressed sympathy for Palestinians who supported Hamas should no longer be considered Thai.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials at all levels regularly advocated with the government for greater protection of refugees and asylum seekers, specifically including those fleeing religious persecution and violence.

On October 2, the Ambassador and the embassy hosted Venerable Phramaha Naphan Santibhaddo, Assistant Abbot of Wat Saket, who delivered a presentation on mindfulness and discussed his interfaith engagements with the Christian and Muslims communities, and the results of these activities. Participants discussed how increased interfaith communication empowers individuals to build foundations of tolerance and trust that benefit their societies, recognize important issues, and find common grounds for action.

On September 29, the Ambassador attended a ceremony of giving offerings to Buddhist Monk the Venerable Associate Professor Phraku Pariyatidhammawong, at Wat Nong Waeng, including paying respects to the relics of Lord Buddha and important Buddhist scriptures. The visit demonstrated U.S. government support for religious freedom in the context of respect for Thai culture and tradition.

On March 29, the Ambassador traveled to the Deep South, the first such visit in more than a decade. The Ambassador hosted an interfaith iftar in the Deep South and underscored the contribution of interfaith community leaders to peacebuilding efforts. The Ambassador reflected on the country's

strong history of respecting religious plurality and called on religious leaders in Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat to continue working toward greater peace, stability, and community in the region. More than 50 local leaders attended, including members of Muslim Provincial Councils, Buddhist leaders, and politicians.

The Ambassador and embassy officials also frequently visited religious sites of local significance and met with UNHCR, international NGOs, academics, and representatives of faith-based organizations to discuss religious pluralism, tolerance, and assistance to refugees fleeing religious persecution.

The embassy awarded multiple grants to NGOs in the Deep South implementing projects focused on respect for religious diversity and inclusion, youth engagement, community building, and digital literacy/disinformation training. Embassy officials led quarterly virtual conversations with faith leaders, bringing together academics, religious leaders, community organizers, and youth influencers to create new connections, share perspectives on religious freedom issues, and consider future collaboration.

The embassy and consulates actively promoted these, and other religious and interfaith engagements through a wide range of social media outlets and platforms.