

# THAILAND 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

Following a 2014 coup, the military government promulgated an interim constitution which does not guarantee religious liberty or protection from discrimination based upon religion, although the law guarantees protection for human dignity, rights, liberties, and equality, subject to other provisions of the interim constitution. In the three Malay Muslim-majority southern provinces, where religion and ethnicity are closely linked, there were continued attacks by suspected Malay Muslim insurgents. In response, the government used martial law provisions to conduct arrests, detentions, and warrantless searches. Human rights groups stated the arrests and detentions were arbitrary, excessive, and needlessly lengthy, and accused the Army of torturing at least three suspected Malay Muslim militants at detention facilities. The government continued to provide financial support for officially recognized religions, including Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Brahmin-Hindu, and Sikh organizations. Unrecognized groups did not receive subsidies, but did not report restrictions on their activities. In August following a 10-year legal process, the Supreme Administrative Court ruled that practitioners of Falun Gong were allowed to legally register as a foundation or association.

In the three Malay Muslim majority provinces, tensions continued between the local ethnic Malay Muslim and ethnic Thai Buddhist communities. According to human rights and civil society reports, these tensions undermined the ability of individuals to practice the full range of religious activities. Civil society and media reports stated violence in the southernmost provinces has increased the divide between the Muslim and Buddhist communities. These tensions were accompanied by an increase in anti-Muslim rhetoric nationwide, particularly in the north, and renewed calls from some prominent Buddhist leaders for establishing Buddhism as the country's official religion.

U.S. embassy and consulate general officers and high-level visitors from the Department of State regularly discussed religious freedom with the government and civil society, including concern about reported arbitrary detention of Malay Muslim persons in the southernmost provinces and the importance of an open, inclusive debate on a new constitution that enjoys support from all communities. The embassy cosponsored initiatives to increase interfaith dialogue in the southernmost provinces among Muslim and Buddhist youth, including an exchange program with youth from around the region to promote religious

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pluralism and a year-long initiative that created activities for hundreds of youth to promote religious pluralism and peace in the southernmost provinces.

### Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 68 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2010 census, the population is 93 percent Buddhist and 5 percent Muslim. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academics, and religious groups state that 85 to 95 percent of the population is Theravada Buddhist and 5 to 10 percent Muslim. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include animist, Christian, Confucian, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh, and Taoist populations.

Most Buddhists also incorporate Hindu and animist practices. The Buddhist clergy (*sangha*) consists of two main schools, Mahanikaya and Dhammayuttika. The former is older and more prevalent within the monastic community. The same religious hierarchy governs both groups.

Islam is the dominant religion in four of the five southernmost provinces. The majority of Muslims in those provinces 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. Statistics provided by the Religious Affairs Department (RAD) of the Ministry of Culture indicate that almost all Muslims are Sunni. 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.

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

#### Legal Framework

An interim constitution adopted by leaders of a 2014 coup states: “The human dignity, rights, liberty, and equality of the people shall be protected.” The document also grants the military government significant power to limit or suppress fundamental human rights protections and does not specifically mention either religious liberty or protection from discrimination based on religion. The interim constitution prohibits Buddhist priests, novices, monks, or members of the clergy from serving in the interim government’s National Legislative Assembly.

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There is no state religion. The law specifically prohibits the defamation or insult of Buddhism and Buddhist clergy. Violators can face up to one year's imprisonment, fines of up to 20,000 baht (\$555), 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 2,000 to 14,000 baht (\$55 to \$388), or both.

Under the law, the RAD is responsible for registering religious groups. There are five officially recognized religious groups: Buddhists, Muslims, Brahmin-Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians. Under provisions of regulations on religious organizations, the RAD recognizes a new religious organization if a national census shows it has at least 5,000 adherents, has a uniquely recognizable theology, and is not politically active. A religious organization must be accepted into at least one of the five existing recognized religious groups that have a belief system similar to that of the applicant before the RAD will grant registration. Benefits conferred by registration include access to state subsidies, tax exempt status, and preferential allocation of resident visas for the registered organization's officials.

The law requires religious education for all students at both the primary and secondary levels; students cannot opt out. Lessons contain information about all of the recognized religious groups in the country. Students who wish to pursue in-depth studies of a particular religion may study at a religious school and can transfer credits to the public school. Individual schools, working in conjunction with their local administrative boards, are authorized to arrange additional religious studies courses. The Supreme Sangha Council and the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand create special curricula for Buddhist and Islamic studies required in public schools.

There are four possibilities for obtaining Islamic education in the southern part of the country: government-subsidized schools offering Islamic education with the national curriculum; private Islamic schools that sometimes offer nonquranic subjects such as foreign languages (Arabic and English) but whose curriculum may not be approved by the government; traditional *pondoks*, or private Islamic day schools, offering Islamic education according to their own curriculum to students of all ages; and *tadika*, an after-school religious course for children in grades one through six, often held in a mosque.

### Government Practices

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The emergency decree in effect in the majority-Muslim southernmost provinces since 2005 gave military, police, and civilian authorities significant powers to restrict certain basic rights, including pretrial detention and searches without warrant, which they used frequently, and delegated certain internal security powers to the armed forces, often followed by accusations of unfair treatment. Human rights organizations reported the government continued to arrest suspected Malay Muslim militants, some of them juveniles, and in some cases held them for a month or more under emergency decree and martial law provisions. Human rights organizations stated the arrests were arbitrary, excessive, and needlessly lengthy. Civil society groups accused the army of torturing at least three suspected Malay Muslim militants at detention facilities. Human rights groups criticized the detention of 17 activists from the network of ethnic Malay Muslim students at Princess of Narathiwat University in April.

Since 1984, the government has not recognized any new religious groups. Despite the lack of formal legal recognition, civil society groups reported unregistered religious groups operated freely, and the government's practice of not recognizing new religious groups did not restrict their activities.

In August following 10 years of legal proceedings, the Supreme Administrative Court ruled that practitioners of Falun Gong were allowed to register legally as a nonprofit foundation or association. Media reports, however, highlighted continued incidents of harassment of Falun Gong adherents by military officials. In September media reported that soldiers in the northern Mae Hong Son province briefly detained and confiscated literature from six Falun Gong activists suspected of disrupting the peace by distributing pamphlets describing the Falun Gong and criticizing treatment of the group in China.

Due to stated concerns about violence, the government continued to provide armed escorts to Buddhist monks for their daily rounds to receive alms and during Buddhist festivals.

According to human rights organizations, Muslim professors and clerics, particularly in the southernmost provinces, faced additional scrutiny because of continuing government concern about Malay Muslim separatist activities. Government officials and journalists stated that some Islamic schools, including some supported by foreign funding, indoctrinated youth into supporting the conflict.

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The government subsidized activities of the five recognized religious communities. The government allocated 5.1 billion baht (\$141 million) for the fiscal year (October 1-September 30) to support the National Buddhism Bureau, an independent state agency. The bureau oversaw the Buddhist clergy and approved the curricula for all Buddhist temples and educational institutions. In addition, the bureau sponsored educational and public relations materials on Buddhism and daily life. The government budgeted 412 million baht (\$11.4 million) for the RAD, divided among funds supporting Buddhist, Islamic, Christian, Brahmin-Hindu, and Sikh organizations. The RAD fiscal year budget also included allocations for religious lectures, Buddhist Sunday school, Islamic study centers, religious activities for persons with disabilities, and interfaith events. The government also provided funds to promote and facilitate Muslim participation in the Hajj.

The government funded Buddhist and Islamic institutes of higher education, religious education programs in public and private schools, renovation and repair of temples and mosques, and daily allowances for travel and health care for monks and Muslim clerics.

The RAD provided funds for the restoration of religious buildings of non-Buddhist, non-Muslim religious groups. These groups did not receive a regular budget to maintain religious buildings, nor government assistance to support their clergy.

Religious groups proselytized without reported interference. Monks working as Buddhist missionaries were active, particularly in border areas among the country's tribal populations, and received some public funding. According to the National Buddhism Bureau, there were 5,161 Buddhist missionaries working nationwide.

Muslim and Christian missionaries did not receive public funds or state subsidies. Islamic organizations had small numbers of citizens working as missionaries in the country. Christian organizations across all denominations had larger numbers of missionaries, both foreign and nationals, operating in the country. Sikhs and Hindus had smaller numbers of missionaries.

There were 1,424 registered foreign missionaries, mostly Christian. Some missionaries were present in accordance with formal quotas set along religious and denominational lines. Many unregistered missionaries, however, also lived and

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worked in the country without government interference. Registration conferred some benefits, such as visas with longer validity, but religious groups reported that being unregistered was not a significant barrier to foreign missionary activity. Many foreign missionaries entered the country using tourist visas and proselytized without RAD's authorization. There were no reports that the government deported or harassed foreign missionaries working without registration.

The government recognized 39 elected Provincial Islamic Committees nationwide. Their responsibilities included providing advice to provincial governors on Islamic issues; deciding on the establishment, relocation, merger, and dissolution of mosques; appointing persons to serve as imams; and issuing announcements and approvals of Islamic religious activities. Committee members in the southernmost provinces reported acting as advisers to government officials in dealing with the area's ethnic and religious conflicts.

The government sponsored interfaith dialogue through regular meetings and public education programs. The RAD carried out and oversaw many of these efforts including a central interfaith youth camp, regional interfaith youth camps, and, in conjunction with provincial authorities, Youth Reconciliation Camps in 76 provinces to foster mutual religious understanding. The RAD also sponsored an interfaith bicycle ride in Bangkok. In August 1,500 participants attended an annual RAD-sponsored interfaith dialogue event in Bangkok.

### **Abuses by Foreign Forces and Non-State Actors**

Malay Muslim insurgents continued attacks against both military and civilian targets. According to statistics from the NGO Deep South Watch, violence (including common crime) resulted in 227 individuals – predominantly civilians but including security service personnel and insurgents – being killed and 481 injured in 582 incidents as of November. At least one Buddhist monk was killed, while another monk and one imam were injured in attacks. Religious schools continued to be scenes of violence, as arsonists burned two schools and four people were killed in gun violence. Through October, teacher protection units – military personnel escorting local educators – were targeted in at least 25 separate attacks, and two Buddhist teachers were killed. (Insurgents reportedly often considered teachers, along with their military escorts, to be targets affiliated with the state.) According to human rights and civil society groups, a decade of constant violence has decreased interaction between the Muslim and Buddhist communities.

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

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. In the south, violence between ethnic Malay Muslims and ethnic Thai Buddhists hindered the ability of individuals to practice the full range of religious activities, according to human rights organizations. As in previous years, Buddhist monks reported they were fearful and felt they could no longer travel freely through southern communities to receive alms or perform rites. As a safety precaution, they often conducted evening religious rites exclusively during daylight hours.

Perceived anti-Buddhist extremism in the south triggered anti-Muslim activities by Buddhists in some northern provinces, according to civil society experts. Some Buddhist temples displayed banners with anti-Muslim messages, and some Buddhist groups maintained social media accounts displaying anti-Islamic rhetoric, and accusing Muslim communities in the north of attempting to threaten Buddhist community populations by converting hill tribesmen to Islam.

In Nan Province, local Buddhists opposed the scheduled construction of the area's first mosque. On March 1, despite martial law prohibiting public assemblies, more than 1,000 local Nan Buddhists gathered at Phra That Chae Hang Temple to protest mosque construction plans. The protestors marched to Nan city hall, carrying banners with anti-Islamic messages, and submitted a letter demanding the provincial government halt construction of the mosque.

In April more than 1,000 residents of the Doi Lor District in Chiang Mai conducted a series of protests against plans to build a halal industrial estate.

In November three private Buddhist organizations submitted a statement calling for the National Reform Steering Assembly to support a proposed initiative to declare Buddhism the official state religion in the new constitution being drafted. Also in November a monk at the prominent Benjamabophit Temple in Bangkok called for Buddhists to burn one mosque for every Buddhist monk killed in the southern provinces.

Although there were no reports of anti-Semitic events, Nazi symbols and figures were sometimes displayed on merchandise and used in advertising.

### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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U.S. embassy and consulate general officers and visiting high level officials discussed religious freedom with the government, including the importance of mutual respect and parity of rights for religious minorities. Embassy and consulate officers regularly visited Muslim and Buddhist religious leaders, academics, and elected officials as part of the embassy's effort to monitor complex religious issues in society.

Embassy- and consulate-hosted iftars provided the opportunity to share information about Muslim life in the United States and highlight the importance of religious freedom and tolerance for guests representing various faiths. A one-year high school exchange program focused on sending Muslim students to the United States. After the students' return, embassy and consulate personnel engaged former participants in follow-on activities. These individuals frequently mentioned appreciation for religious tolerance and religious freedom in the United States as an outcome of their stay. The embassy provided grants to three youth leaders to participate in exchange programs with youth from around the region focused on strengthening religious pluralism. Another embassy-administered program provided for year-long activities for hundreds of youth to promote religious pluralism and peace in the southernmost provinces.

The embassy and consulate also regularly engaged with media outlets associated with minority religious groups, and reached out to hill tribes and Muslim communities throughout the country with messages supporting religious freedom, including respect for individual rights and the importance of religious pluralism.

The embassy supported religious tolerance in the country's southernmost provinces through multi-year assistance programs focusing on youth to build understanding between religious groups in the troubled region. One project has been aimed at building trust between Muslims and Buddhists in six communities in Yala Province, while another has been seeking to reduce day-to-day violence and increase support for long-term peace by promoting understanding among religious groups.