

CAMBODIA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states Buddhism is the state religion and is promoted by the government through holiday observances, religious training, Buddhist instruction in public school, and financial support to Buddhist institutions. The law provides for freedom of belief and religious worship, provided such freedom neither interferes with others' beliefs and religions nor violates public order and security. The government refused to allow the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to resettle a group of Christian Montagnards UNCHR said had legitimate claims of asylum and who had fled persecution in Vietnam. In October the government cooperated with the United Nations on the resettlement of seven of the Montagnards to a third country, but it said an additional 29 had weak asylum cases and announced plans to forcibly repatriate them back to Vietnam, even though UNHCR was ready to assist in resettling them. The government condemned a statement by the UN special rapporteur for the situation of human rights in Cambodia criticizing the treatment of the Montagnards as interference in domestic affairs.

Villagers killed several Phnong people suspected of practicing sorcery due to their animist beliefs and practices. There also were continued reports of societal barriers to the integration of the predominantly Muslim Cham people.

U.S. embassy officials discussed the issue of the Montagnard Christians with the government. Embassy officials also discussed the importance of religious acceptance and diversity with government representatives, political party leaders, civil society organizations, and leaders of Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim groups. The embassy promoted themes of religious tolerance and understanding through a formal iftar dinner, speakers' series, and other forms of engagement.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 16.2 million (July 2017 estimate). The 2013 Intercensal Population Survey conducted by the National Institute of Statistics said Buddhists make up 97.9 percent of the population, almost all of them Theravada Buddhist, according to the Ministry of Cults and Religions (MCR). The vast majority of ethnic Khmer Cambodians are Buddhist. Ethnic Vietnamese in the country traditionally practice Mahayana Buddhism, although there are many who have adopted Theravada Buddhism. Other ethnic

Vietnamese practice Roman Catholicism, and they make up the vast majority of Catholics in the country. Ethnic Vietnamese make up approximately 5 percent of the population. According to government estimates, approximately 2.1 percent of the population is Muslim, although some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) estimate the Muslim population to be 4-5 percent. The Muslim population is predominantly ethnic Cham, although not all Cham are Muslim. The Cham typically live in towns and rural fishing villages on the banks of the Tonle Sap Lake and the Mekong River, as well as in Kampot Province. There are four branches of Islam represented in the country: the Shafi'i branch, practiced by as many as 90 percent of Muslims in the country; the Salafi (Wahhabi) branch; the indigenous Iman-San branch; and the Kadiani branch. The remainder of the population includes Bahais, Jews, ethnic Vietnamese Cao Dai, and members of various Christian denominations.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of belief and religious worship, provided such freedom neither interferes with others' beliefs and religions nor violates public order and security. The constitution establishes Buddhism as the state religion and provides for state support of Buddhist education; it also prohibits discrimination based on religion. The law requires that religious groups refrain from openly criticizing other religious groups, although this provision is rarely tested. The law also forbids religious organizations from organizing events, rallies, meetings, and training sessions that are politically focused.

The law requires all religious groups, including Buddhist groups, to register with the MCR to conduct religious activities. The law mandates that groups must inform the government of the goals of their religious organization, describe its activities, provide biographical information for all religious leaders, describe funding sources, commit to submitting annual reports detailing all activities, and refrain from insulting other religious groups, fomenting disputes, or undermining national security. Registration requires approvals from numerous local, provincial, and national government offices, a process which can take up to 90 days. The MCR, however, has no authority to punish religious groups for failing to register, and there are no associated penalties for failing to register. Registered religious groups receive an income tax exemption from the Ministry of Economy and Finance.

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

The law requires separate registration of all places of worship and religious schools. Unregistered places of worship and religious schools may be shut down temporarily until they are registered, although the MCR says it has not taken such action. The law also makes a legal distinction between “places of worship” and “offices of prayer.” The establishment of a place of worship requires that the founders own the structure and the land on which it is located. The facility must have a minimum capacity of 200 persons, and the permit application requires the support of at least 100 congregants. An office of prayer may be located in a rented property and has no minimum capacity requirement. The permit application for an office of prayer requires the support of at least 25 congregants. Places of worship must be located at least two kilometers (1.2 miles) from each other and may not be used for political purposes or to house criminals or fugitives. The distance requirement applies only to the construction of new places of worship and not to offices of religious organizations or offices of prayer.

Religious schools must be registered with the MCR and the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MOEYS). Religious schools are advised to follow the MOEYS core curriculum, which does not include a religious component; however, schools may supplement lessons with a religious curriculum in addition to the ministry’s core curriculum. The government promotes Buddhist religious instruction in public schools in coordination with MOEYS. Non-Buddhist students are allowed to opt out of this instruction. The law does not mandate non-Buddhist religious instruction, and no other religions are taught in public schools. Non-Buddhist religious instruction may be provided by private institutions.

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

Government Practices

In August UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia Rhona Smith released a statement following her two-week mission to the country affirming UNHCR had determined 36 Vietnamese Christian Montagnards who had fled to Cambodia had legitimate asylum claims. The Cambodian government, however, had not agreed to settle them within the country or facilitate their transit to a third country for resettlement. In October the government determined that

seven of the Montagnards had legitimate refugee claims and cooperated in sending them to a third country. It said the remaining 29 had weak asylum cases and announced plans to forcibly repatriate them back to Vietnam, even though UNHCR was ready to assist in resettling them. The government dismissed the special rapporteur's statement and condemned her for what it described as interference in its domestic affairs.

In September during a speech to garment workers in Kampong Cham Province, Prime Minister Hun Sen urged all private-sector employers to allow Muslims to wear headscarves and conservative clothing at the workplace. During Ramadan, the prime minister reaffirmed Muslim rights to wear religious head coverings at school and in photographs used for official identification. He also pledged support to Muslim teachers across the country and praised the government for facilitating their integration into the public education system.

The government continued to promote Buddhist holidays by declaring some of them as official holidays off from work, provide Buddhist training and education to monks and others in pagodas, and provide financial support to an institute that performed research and published materials on Khmer culture and Buddhist traditions. The government did not grant similar treatment to other religions or religious holidays.

The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, also known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, continued to hear testimony related to charges of ethnic- and religious-based genocide against the Cham population during the Khmer Rouge era from 1975 to 1979.

During Ramadan Prime Minister Hun Sen hosted an iftar for more than 4,700 members of the Muslim community. In his speech he told his guests there was no basis for political discrimination in the country and called on Buddhists to be tolerant and accepting of the Muslim and Christian communities.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Villagers killed several ethnic Phnong people suspected of practicing sorcery due to their animist beliefs. In July a 29-year-old man was shot in the head in Mondulkiri, and in November a 62-year-old man was beheaded by villagers in Kampot; both were accused of sorcery.

There were reports from members of the Cham Muslim community of barriers to their integration into society. Local media reported some members of the majority Buddhist community continued to view the Cham and other minority ethnic groups with suspicion as purported practitioners of sorcery or “black magic.” In some cases, those who were suspected of practicing black magic were threatened or, in past years, killed by villagers or by their own family members.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials raised religious freedom and tolerance with MCR representatives and other government officials. MCR officials spoke about their initial plans of drafting a new law on religious freedom. The embassy offered to review the draft law when appropriate. Embassy officials also discussed the issue of forced repatriation and residency of Montagnard Christians with government officials and members of international and local NGOs.

The embassy underscored the importance of acceptance of religious diversity with leaders of Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim groups, emphasizing the importance of interfaith tolerance in a democratic society. Embassy programs focused on faith-based communities and promoted pluralism through exchanges and youth programs.

Several embassy programs specifically focused on the preservation of Cham heritage, including religious heritage, through reading and writing instruction in the Cham language, and included the preservation and study of religious artifacts from the ancient Kingdom of Champa. The embassy continued a series of speaking engagements and focus groups in which Islamic leaders from around the world engaged with the Cham community to provide them with a deeper understanding of the constructive role that various Muslim populations play throughout the world in their workforces and communities.

Other embassy programs focused on interfaith cooperation, community leadership, and conflict resolution. Embassy officials toured the country on several occasions to meet members of the community, in the process promoting religious tolerance, showing respect for Cham culture, lessening the isolation of the Cham, and supporting Cham integration into the wider culture. The Ambassador also hosted an iftar for members of the Cham and Muslim community during Ramadan. The iftar included members of the ruling and opposition parties, youth groups, and civil society and allowed for open discussions about the importance of religious tolerance and acceptance.