

CAMBODIA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states Buddhism is the state religion, and it is promoted by the government through holiday observances, religious training, Buddhist instruction in public schools, 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 law does not allow non-Buddhist denominations to proselytize publicly. The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia sentenced former Khmer Rouge leaders Khieu Samphan and Noun Chea to life imprisonment for ethnic- and religious-based genocide against the ethnic Vietnamese and Cham populations during the Khmer Rouge era from 1975 to 1979. The government refused to allow the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to permanently accept a group of Christian Montagnards from Vietnam who came to the country to claim refugee status. There were reports local authorities discriminated against ethnic minorities in the country, including the primarily animist Phnong, such as threatening not to provide public services or sign legal documents.

Villagers killed at least one person suspected of practicing sorcery due to his animist beliefs and practices. There were continued reports of societal barriers to the integration of the predominantly Muslim Cham ethnic minority as well as Christians.

U.S. embassy officials 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. U.S. embassy officials raised religious freedom and tolerance with Ministry of Cults and Religion (MCR) representatives and other government officials. The Ambassador traveled to Mondulhiri in January to meet with an ethnic Phnong community, in the process promoting religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 16.4 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the MCR, approximately 95 percent of the population is Buddhist, of whom 95 percent practice Theravada Buddhism. The remaining 5 percent of the population includes Christians, Muslims, animists, Baha'is, Jews, and Cao Dai. Ethnic Vietnamese traditionally practice Mahayana Buddhism,

although many have adopted Theravada Buddhism. Other ethnic Vietnamese practice Roman Catholicism, and these make up the vast majority of Catholics in the country. Catholics constitute 0.4 percent of the population. Nongovernmental estimates of the Protestant population, including evangelical Christians, vary but are less than 2 percent of the total population.

According to government estimates, approximately 2.1 percent of the population is Muslim, although some nongovernmental organizations estimate Muslims constitute 4 to 5 percent of the population. 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.

An estimated 0.28 percent of the population are ethnic Phnong, the majority of whom follow animistic religious practices. An additional estimated 0.25 percent of the population includes Baha'is, Jews, and ethnic Vietnamese Cao Dai.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of belief and religious worship, as long as 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, but it does not elaborate the legal consequences for those who violate this restriction. 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. 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; submit 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 that can take up to 90 days. There are no penalties for failing to register, however. Registered religious groups receive an income tax exemption from the Ministry of Economy and Finance.

The law 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 to convince persons 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 there were no reports of the MCR enforcing this. 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). The MOEYS advises religious schools to follow the ministry’s core curriculum, which does not include a religious component; however, schools may supplement the ministry’s core curriculum with Buddhist lessons. The government requires public schools to coordinate with MOEYS when implementing supplemental Buddhist lessons. Non-Buddhist students are allowed to opt out of this instruction. The law does not allow non-Buddhist religious instruction 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 November the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, also known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, sentenced Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan to life

imprisonment related to charges of ethnic- and religious-based genocide against ethnic Vietnamese and the Cham population during the Khmer Rouge era from 1975 to 1979.

In February local authorities in Mondalkiri Province threatened to withhold public services or sign legal documents, including family registrations, land titles, and birth certificates, for ethnic Phnong, most of whom are animists, unless they pledged to vote for the ruling party in the July national election.

In January an ethnic Phnong community in Kratie Province accused local authorities and state soldiers of stealing more than 1,000 hectares (2,500 acres) of community land. In February the Phnong ethnic minority in Mondulkiri Province submitted a petition with 792 signatures to the National Assembly requesting the government to dismiss Yung Sarom, Director of Rural Development in Mondulkiri Province. They accused him of preventing the Phnong from celebrating their religious ceremony. At year's end, the National Assembly had not taken any action to investigate the charge against Yung Sarom.

The government refused to allow UNHCR to accept permanently a group of Christian Montagnards from Vietnam who came to the country to claim refugee status. Of the estimated 200 Christian Montagnards who fled Vietnam and were in Cambodia in 2017, 29 remained in the country. Two children were born to refugee families, bringing the total to 31. The *Phnom Penh Post* newspaper reported an increase of police presence outside the residence of this group in March and April. The government had said it would allow the 31 to move to a third country if UNHCR would speak to the Vietnamese government and obtain its approval. UNHCR rejected the proposal, however, saying the Cambodian government should communicate with the Vietnamese government directly.

The government continued to promote Buddhist holidays by grants of official status and declarations of government holidays. The government also provided Buddhist training and education to monks and laypersons in pagodas, and it gave 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.

In May Prime Minister Hun Sen and his wife Bun Rany Hun Sen hosted an iftar in Phnom Penh for more than 5,000 members of the Muslim community. In his remarks, Hun Sen thanked the Muslim community for trusting his leadership and for their contribution to the maintenance of peace. According to *Arab News*,

Yousef bin Ahmed Al-Othaimen, Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, sent a message saying the country was “a beacon of peace and tolerance” in Southeast Asia. In August Deputy Prime Minister Sar Kheng attended the second Annual National Inter-Faith forum with an estimated 2,000 Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists, and Muslims to promote harmony among different religious followers.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In February villagers stabbed to death a 48-year-old farmer in Kampot Province who was accused of sorcery. In past years, villagers or family members killed or threatened those who were suspected of practicing black magic.

There were reports from members of the Cham Muslim community of barriers to social integration. Local media reported that some members of the majority Buddhist community continued to view the Cham and other minority ethnic groups with suspicion as purported practitioners of sorcery.

In October The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints announced plans to construct a temple in Phnom Penh.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials regularly raised religious freedom and tolerance with MCR representatives and other government officials.

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 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 also supported programs to preserve Buddhist sites.

The Ambassador traveled to Monduliri in January to meet with an ethnic Phnong community, in the process promoting religious tolerance, showing respect for minority culture, lessening the isolation of minority groups, and supporting ethnic

minority integration into the wider culture. Other high-level embassy officers conducted a similar outreach trip again in November.