

LAOS 2018 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 religious umbrella groups – Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Baha’i Faith – and generally requires other religious groups to affiliate with one of these four groups to operate legally. A decree issued in 2016 with the stated intent of clarifying rules for religious practice defines the government as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities. Under the decree, any religious group must register with the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) and meet administrative requirements on an annual basis. The decree includes provisions on how groups operate, establish houses of worship, and travel for religious purposes. The government continued to disseminate implementing instructions and held several workshops to discuss the decree with provincial and local authorities. Religious leaders said that the 2016 decree helped to delineate religious rights, but established requirements that were more onerous, unrealistic, and used to restrict religious practices. According to some religious leaders, officials in urban areas and in some districts had a better understanding of laws that govern religious activities and promoted the concept of religious freedom more than in the past. Conflicts and other incidents that restrict religious freedom remained prevalent in rural areas. A representative from the National Assembly’s Department of Ethnic and Religious Affairs said that the 2016 decree had “not reached all areas.” Reports continued of authorities, especially in isolated villages, arresting, detaining, and exiling followers of minority religions, particularly Christians. There were reports of authorities warning citizens not to convert to Christianity, forbidding members to gather for religious services, and pressuring members of minority religions to renounce their faith. Christian groups also reported longstanding problems registering and constructing churches in some areas, as well as with obtaining permission to travel within the country. Reportedly, Christians who congregated in homes and other unregistered facilities for religious purposes were sometimes harassed by authorities. Christians said authorities allowed them to conduct Christmas services in their churches or at their pastors’ homes, provided they did not preach against the government and law and they invited local officials to attend to guarantee “order and security.”

According to government and religious group sources, tensions continued in rural areas between animists and growing Christian communities. Burial ceremonies

were a point of contention, with some reports of animists and Buddhists interfering with Christian burials or not allowing Christians to be buried in public cemeteries.

U.S. embassy officials regularly raised specific religious freedom cases with the government and continued encouraging open dialogue and resolution of conflicts, including those associated with implementing the 2016 decree. Embassy officials attended a government-organized workshop that discussed laws promoting religious freedom and encouraged the government to continue holding these workshops. The embassy maintained regular contact with officials in MOHA and the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), a mass organization of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party responsible for some administration of religious organizations, and discussed the challenges faced by religious groups and government plans to improve religious freedom. Embassy officials were also in regular contact with religious leaders and laypersons from a wide variety of denominations and faiths to understand better the problems they faced in practicing their faiths.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.2 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2015 national census (the most recent figures available), 64.7 percent of the population is Buddhist, 1.7 percent Christian, 31.4 percent has no religion, and the remaining 2.1 percent identify as other or having a nonlisted religion. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion of the ethnic or "lowland" Lao, who constitute 53.2 percent of the overall population. According to the LFNC and MOHA, the remainder of the population comprises at least 48 ethnic minority groups, most of which practice animism and ancestor worship. Animism is predominant among Sino-Thai groups, such as the Thai Dam and Thai Daeng, and the 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, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) members, and followers of Confucianism together constitute less than 3 percent of the population. According to the international Christian rights NGO Aid to the Church in Need's 2018 Religious Freedom Report, Christians comprise 3.2 percent of the population. The Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) estimates its membership at 200,000 and the Catholic Church estimates its at 55,000.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the right and freedom to believe or not believe in any religion and states citizens are equal before the law regardless of their beliefs or ethnic group. The government officially recognizes four religious umbrella groups – Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Baha’i Faith. It generally requires other religious groups to affiliate with one of these four groups in order to operate legally. 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 priests of other religions to participate in activities that are beneficial to the country and people.” It prohibits all acts that create division between religious groups and classes of persons.

Decree 315, enacted in 2016, upholds “respect for the religious rights and freedom” of both believers and nonbelievers. The decree’s stated purpose is to set the principles, regulations, and laws concerning the governance and protection of religious activities for clergy, teachers of religion, believers, and religious groups in order to preserve and promote national culture, increase solidarity among members of religious groups, and “preserve and develop the nation.” The decree clarifies rules for religious practice, extends registration requirements to Buddhist groups, which had previously had a de facto exemption, 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 MOHA. The government encourages other religious groups seeking official recognition to affiliate with one of the four umbrella groups. Government-recognized Christian denominations are limited to the Catholic Church, the LEC, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. All other Christian denominations wishing to be recognized are encouraged to register as part of the LEC instead of receiving separate recognition.

Under the decree, religious groups must present information on elected or appointed officeholders to national, provincial, and 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 are required to obtain provincial level approval; and groups operating in

multiple villages are required to obtain district level approval. If a group wishes 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 village authority approval. 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 nearly all aspects of religious practice – such as congregating, holding religious services, travel for 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 decree empowers MOHA to order the cessation of any religious activities or beliefs not in agreement with policies, traditional customs, laws, or regulations within its jurisdiction. It may stop any religious activity threatening national stability, peace, and social order, causing serious damage to the environment, or affecting national solidarity or unity between tribes and religions, including threats to the lives, properties, health, or reputations of others. The decree also requires 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.

All houses of worship must register under the law and conform to applicable regulations. Any maintenance, restoration, and construction activities at religious facilities must receive MOHA approval from all levels. Local authorities may provide opinions regarding building, care, and maintenance of religious facilities, present their findings to their respective provincial governors and city mayors for consideration, and subsequently ask MOHA to review and approve activities conducted in religious facilities.

The Decree on Associations, No. 238, passed in late 2017, allows government to control and/or prohibit the formation of associations and includes measures to criminalize unregistered associations and allow for prosecution of their members.

Individuals entering the clergy for more than three months require 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 approve. The shorter period stipulations are

particularly relevant to Buddhists, as every Buddhist male is expected to enter the monkhood at least once in his life, often for fewer than three months.

The Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) and MOHA must approve the travel abroad of clergy and religious teachers for specialized studies. Generally, students going abroad for any kind of study (including religious studies) require approval from the MOES. Religious organizations conducting religious activities overseas must receive approval from the appropriate geographical MOHA level.

According to the LFNC Law as amended in April, the LFNC may educate and meet with religious leaders, clergy, teachers, and members to ensure compliance with laws and regulations, reduce ethnic and religious tensions, and “contribute to the development of the nation.” LFNC officials may listen to opinions and concerns of religious communities in order to work with police or other authorities to investigate and resolve problems.

The government controls written materials for religious audiences. The decree regulates the importation and printing of religious materials and production of books, documents, icons, and symbols of various religions. The Ministry of Culture 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 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.

The decree states the government may continue to 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.

The decree requires Buddhist clergy to have identification cards, and clergy of other religions are required to have certificates to prove they have received legitimate religious training.

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

Reports continued of authorities, especially in isolated villages, arresting, detaining, and exiling followers of minority religions, particularly Christians. The central government said it continued efforts to offer protections to religious groups as stipulated in the law, but stated this was a challenge in isolated areas.

In August a pastor with close connections to Christians throughout the country reported that district authorities in Mahaxsai District in Khammoune Province told a group of Christians to stop worshipping and then tried to extort money from them. When the group did not give them any money, the authorities arrested the group leader and detained him for five days.

In September authorities detained seven members of the LEC for a week at a district jail in Champassack Province. Before they were taken to jail, the village chief forced the LEC members into a vehicle belonging to the jail and reportedly drove them around the village, warning other villagers not to follow the LEC faith. One of the detainees said local authorities released them in part because MOHA organized a workshop on Decree 315 in the same province that week. The detainees were released after the workshop ended.

The advocacy group Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF) reported that on November 18 three police officers in Keovilia village, Vilabouly District, Savannakhet Province, arrested three men and one elderly woman for being Christian. The report identified the woman as “Grandma Bounlam” and the three men by the surnames Duangtha, Khampan, and Ponsawan. The officers who made the arrests were identified by their surnames as Don, a police major stationed at Vilabouly District, and two officers stationed in Vang District, Pim and No. According to HRWLRF, the police held the men in handcuffs and feet stocks. Police released the four, but evicted them from their homes and confiscated their property. According to HRWLRF, police threatened them with unspecified criminal charges if they did not renounce Christianity.

Radio Free Asia and HRWLRF reported that in December five other Christians were arrested in Non Soung Village, Phin District, Savannakhet Province, including one pastor who had come from another village to help celebrate Christmas. Radio Free Asia quoted an anonymous local who said that Christians

were subject to restrictions and “are not allowed to teach from the Bible or to spread their religion to others because Christianity is the religion of the Europeans and Americans.”

According to Radio Free Asia, HRWLRF reported police in Nakanong village, Phin District, Savannakhet Province, arrested three church leaders and four other Christians on December 29 for conducting an “illegal” church service and held them for several days before releasing them. HRWLRF reportedly said authorities also demolished the church stage, cut the power line, destroyed the sound system, and seized three mobile phones.

In some cases, church members reportedly were arrested for practicing their faith but charged with another crime. In Houaphanh Province, three members of the LEC were arrested for traveling without proper documentation and were charged with illegally entering a forest.

According to Christian media outlet World Watch Monitor, in January local officials in Luang Prabang forced a Christian and his family to move to another part of the city and fined them the equivalent of \$400. According to a local source, the “family book” identification document of the family, necessary to move about freely, was kept by the local chief. The family could not return to collect the book without incurring additional fines of up to \$1200, the fine given to anyone who chooses to become a Christian in that area, according to the source.

Some local officials pressured Christians to renounce their faith or encouraged them to move elsewhere. For example, in Huaython village in Luang Prabang Province, local officials told approximately 20 families belonging to the LEC to renounce their faith because they should not believe in a “foreign religion.” One family renounced their religion and local authorities gave them approximately 50,000 Lao kip (\$6) as a reward. In Sone District in Houaphanh Province, district officials told nine families they would have to move to another province if they did not renounce their Christian faith. Eight of the nine families opted to move to Bokeo Province.

A representative of the Seventh-day Adventist Church said village authorities in Khammouane Province forced Church members to sign a pledge, promising they would not gather for religious services. According to the representative, the village authorities said that Church members could believe in a religion but could not gather to worship.

Leaders of the recognized minority religious groups said they were aware of fewer incidents of abuse of villagers who had converted to Christianity than in previous years; in most cases, those who were arrested were fined and released. In some cases local officials reportedly threatened Protestants with arrest or expulsion from their villages if they did not comply with orders issued by the local authorities either to stop practicing their faith or not to join in community activities.

In discussing Decree 315 and other laws, religious leaders said officials in urban areas and in some districts had a strong understanding of laws governing religious activities, but conflicts and other incidents that restricted religious freedom remained prevalent in rural areas. MOHA and LFNC officials continued to acknowledge some local officials were incorrectly applying regulations, were creating their own regulations contrary to national law, or simply were unaware of all provisions in Decree 315. A representative from the National Assembly's Department of Ethnic and Religious Affairs said that Decree 315 had "not reached all areas."

Religious officials said that while Decree 315 helped delineate religious rights, the decree established requirements many religious groups felt were onerous, unrealistic, and used to restrict religious practices. According to some minority religious groups, both local and central government officials referred to the constitution, Decree 315 (or its predecessor, Decree 92), and social harmony as reasons for continuing to restrict and monitor religious activity, especially the activities of new or small Christian organizations among minority ethnic group members.

Religious groups said they were concerned the government had not yet implemented the decree fully in practice. If the government attempted to enforce all aspects of the decree, one church official said, "We won't be able to do anything." Baha'i representatives said the decree was a positive development and reflected the government's "sincerity" to promote religious freedom. They also said the decree was not overly restrictive, but needed more clarity. They recommended the government devote more resources to implementing it at the district level.

A number of nonprofit associations (NPAs) and some religious groups called for the repeal of the Decree on Associations No. 238, which they said had the potential to restrict operations of nonprofit organizations. While the decree pertains to NPAs, Voice of the Martyrs, an international Christian NGO, stated local Christians were concerned authorities could use the decree to shut down religious

activity and religious expression. Mission Network News said the decree threatened Christians' right to meet. There were no reports from other local religious groups the decree had been used to regulate religious activity.

Some minority religious groups, including the Catholic Church, LEC, Baha'i Faith, and Seventh-day Adventists, successfully met the annual administrative requirements outlined in Decree 315, such as providing information on the number of members, religious texts, and plans for services during the year. Other groups, including the Church of Jesus Christ, were still waiting for the government to approve their registration applications at year's end. A MOHA official stated the registration process was not easy and said that during the review process MOHA consulted with other religious groups to discuss the registration application in an attempt to minimize conflicts between established and new religious groups. The MOHA official said some Christian groups questioned whether another group wishing to register was Christian.

The LEC, the second largest religious group after Buddhists, continued to serve as an umbrella group for all registered Christian denominations other than Catholics and Seventh-day Adventists, as religious leaders reported applications for recognition of new Christian groups were too difficult. Several unregistered religious groups, including the Church of Jesus Christ, continued their efforts to register independently from the LEC due to differences in doctrinal beliefs; their applications remained pending at year's end.

Although the law prohibits members of religious groups not registered with MOHA or the LFNC from practicing their faith, members of several groups reportedly did so quietly without interference.

Religious leaders reported various incidents throughout the country related to obtaining travel permission. Some religious officials were detained even with proper travel authorization; most cases were resolved within hours of occurrence. An official with the Seventh-day Adventist Church said if a member of the Church needed to travel to another province, he or she must submit an application to MOHA in advance and needed approval at the national and provincial levels, and it could take up to 20 days to get approval. An official at MOHA said it tried to approve travel plans within 10 days, and encouraged religious groups to submit annual travel plans.

In March an official with the Catholic Church in Vientiane said the LFNC reportedly gave his local church permission to hold a religious service on April 1

for Easter. Local authorities, however, stopped a church official who was traveling on March 31 to participate in the service and told him he could only travel on April 1.

Religious leaders said the Christmas season presented challenges, especially involving detention of Christians traveling without permission to attend religious events outside of their normal locales. Members of the LEC said they submitted travel plans for the Christmas season to all appropriate levels of government but did not receive all the required approvals.

According to Radio Free Asia, in December an LFNC official from Xiengkhouang Province said authorities allowed Christians to conduct Christmas services in their churches or at their pastors' homes provided they did not preach against the government and law and they invited local officials to attend to guarantee "order and security." Radio Free Asia also reported that, according to a Christian in Vientiane, Christians conducted Christmas services in the capital with government authorities present for "security and protection."

According to Muslim community leaders, Muslims continued to worship at the two active mosques in Vientiane, the only mosques in the country. According to the Muslim Association, its leaders met regularly with LFNC and MOHA officials and maintained an effective working relationship with the government. The government permitted individuals from Thailand to conduct Islamic lessons.

While animists generally reported little governmental interference, the government continued to discourage animist practices it deemed outdated, dangerous, or illegal, such as the practice in some tribes of killing children born with defects or burying the bodies of deceased relatives beneath homes.

Representatives of Baha'i communities in urban areas, including Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Luang Prabang, reported local authorities generally were "comfortable" with Baha'i practitioners and did not interfere with or restrict their activities.

Christian religious leaders said authorities continued to enforce a ban on proselytizing in public. Some religious groups, including the Church of Jesus Christ, said they relied on word-of-mouth to attract new members. Authorities continued to enforce rules requiring programs or activities conducted outside houses of worship receive prior approval from local or higher officials.

The government strictly enforced a prohibition on proselytizing by foreigners. Several religious groups said they welcomed foreign members to visit the country but needed to be cautious about the kinds of activities foreigners engaged in. The Church of Jesus Christ had an agreement with MOHA that allowed two missionaries in the country but the missionaries were allowed only to teach English and could not engage in religious discussions.

Authorities continued to control imports of religious materials but several religious groups said they could find most religious texts and documents online so they did not need government permission. MOHA officials said they coordinated with religious groups to review imported materials to help ensure they were in line with the organization's beliefs.

Several religious groups reported problems with building places of worship. An official with the LEC said there were approximately 600 LEC churches throughout the country. He said the LEC had more than 1,000 "unofficial" churches where worship services were conducted in homes, in part due to the difficulties of obtaining building permits from local authorities. An official with the Catholic Church said it had encountered challenges building churches as well. During the year, the Church asked for permission to build churches in several villages but only received vague responses. The LFNC Religious Affairs Department continued to urge that designated church structures replace house churches whenever possible. Local authorities in many areas considered group worship in homes illegal and told villagers they needed a permit to worship at home, although Christian groups said local authorities in many areas considered group worship in homes illegal even with a permit. Religious group representatives said the building permit process began at the local level and then required district, provincial, and ultimately central-level LFNC and MOHA permission. Christian groups said the government would not issue permits to build new churches, and local officials used the process to block construction of new churches. There were reports, however, of authorities permitting the construction of new churches, for example in the city of Vang Vieng and in Attapeu Province.

Many religious leaders said they continued to experience lengthy delays in obtaining permits for church construction, and generally received no response to requests. Some religious leaders said that Decree 315 had neither clear guidelines nor clear timelines for construction of religious buildings. A Christian religious official said the government used bureaucratic delays to halt construction as long as possible in order to keep minority religious groups from expanding. According to the director general of the National Assembly's Ethnic and Religious Affairs

Department, many of the delays involved legal matters concerning construction, or in some cases, a cluster of Christian families in a village wished to build two or three churches in their village, which would result in more churches than authorities believed necessary for the number of Christians.

At year's end, the Catholic Church continued to discuss plans with the LFNC to reacquire land adjoining the Sacred Heart Cathedral in central Vientiane that the Church previously owned before the Communist Party came to power in 1975. The Catholic Church has tried to reacquire the land since 2001. In November 2017, the government announced plans to build a school on that land with funding from China and did not inform the Church of these plans.

According to MOES, there was no Buddhist curriculum taught as religion in any public schools. The government, however, promoted the teaching of Buddhist practices in public schools as part of national culture. Mandatory cultural sessions included lessons taught in Buddhist temples and, in order to advance to the next grade level, educational authorities required all students pray in Buddhist temples. Christian students reported discomfort with the requirement. MOES said it allowed parents to remove their children from the classes if they were dissatisfied with the program. In several provinces, however, lessons in Buddhism remained mandatory to pass to the next grade level. This was especially true in areas where temples provided education because the government was unable to support a public school. A number of private schools affiliated with various religious groups existed throughout the country and accepted students from any religious denomination.

With advance permission and a requirement there be no open proselytizing, government authorities permitted Lao and expatriate Christians to organize a public, open-air religious music event for the second year in a row. The Vientiane International Gospel Music Festival took place November 2-4 at the Vientiane Center shopping mall, with performances by local and foreign artists and bands. LEC officials said, however, the government told the organizers it would be the last time they received a permit to hold the festival. The LEC officials also said that the word "gospel" was not translated into Lao and only appeared in English-language materials.

A Christian pastor said that in limited cases, provincial government officials continued to ask religious leaders not to report grievances to foreigners to avoid unwanted publicity. He added the LEC did not want to embarrass the government or jeopardize its relatively strong relationship so the Church often chose not to

publicize incidents related to religious freedom. One religious official said the government blamed religious groups for publicizing grievances and giving the country a bad reputation. According to religious groups, in some instances local authorities continued efforts to keep individuals who had been arrested, banished, punished, marginalized, or had otherwise been the victim of abuses due to their religious beliefs out of sight of international observers.

An official with the Catholic Church said government officials who are Catholic were promoted at a slower rate than their Buddhist counterparts and needed to take precautions to not be seen attending church services. Other religious groups noted it was hard for their members to join the government or advance to higher-level positions, or to become village chiefs. Religious groups stated they were aware of no openly non-Buddhist or non-animist government officials in higher-level posts at the provincial or national levels, although a Baha'i official said there were three Baha'i village chiefs.

Religious officials said that during the year, a man with mental health issues caused disruptions in a village. Local authorities blamed minority religious groups for the disruptions, claiming the man was a member of both the LEC and the Seventh-day Adventists, even though he was not a registered member of either church. Other religious officials said local authorities at times used religion as a scapegoat for domestic violence or other issues within a family.

In dealing with local conflicts regarding religious problems, officials at MOHA reported they first waited for local authorities to resolve an issue before getting involved. One MOHA official said the ministry did not have the resources to respond to every conflict.

The LFNC and MOHA stated they continued to visit areas where religious freedom abuses had reportedly taken place to instruct local officials on government policy and law. LFNC and MOHA officials said they frequently traveled out of the capital to encourage religious groups to practice in accordance with the country's laws and regulations. They also hosted training workshops for local officials to explain officials' obligations under the constitution and the right to believe or not to believe in religion. During these sessions, central authorities provided training to provincial LFNC and MOHA officials on Decree 315 and other laws governing religion and held workshops with local officials and religious leaders that reviewed the basic tenets of Buddhism, Christianity, the Baha'i Faith, and Islam. With support from an international NGO, MOHA held seven workshops in six different provinces during the year with nearly 400 officials in

attendance, including a four-day workshop on religious freedom in Bolikhamxai Province in October. The LFNC offered seven workshops in four provinces with more than 250 participants. The government directly funded one workshop, and religious groups contributed some funding for the workshops. Officials said the workshops provided a forum for MOHA and LFNC to explain the different aspects of Decree 315 and hear about the challenges that minority religious groups encounter under it and other provisions of the law.

In collaboration with the LFNC, an international NGO continued to conduct training for provincial and district officials and local religious leaders throughout the year. The training was designed to help the officials and religious leaders understand the law and each other better.

In October the National Assembly organized a three-day workshop that included officials from the four recognized religions and assembly members from all 18 provinces. The religious organizations presented their beliefs, administration, and contributions to the country, while MOHA and MOPS discussed aspects of the new decree. Assembly members also had the opportunity to ask questions of the religious officials.

The officially recognized religious groups and the government continued to print and distribute the decree and its implementation guidelines.

The Church of Jesus Christ organized study tours to Utah for government officials. These and similar trips required approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Christian sources reported religious tensions occurred in villages and rural areas, particularly in response to the growth of Christian congregations or disagreements over access to village resources. One religious official said persons living in villages were often unaware of Decree 315 and village leaders did not encourage religious freedom. The LEC noted continued conflicts in the southern part of the country where church officials said local residents continued to see their church as an unwelcome “foreign religion.” Some religious leaders said misunderstandings continued to occur, which they said were due to low education levels in remote parts of the country. In some cases, villagers threatened to expel Christians from the village if they did not renounce their faith, or offered them payment to renounce their religion. In many villages, disputes of all kinds (including religious disputes) resolved by a committee without getting police or other government

officials involved. Christian group leaders said this process often resulted in compromises, such as encouraging Christians to support local Buddhist or animist ceremonies without participating in them.

Christians said burial practices remained an issue throughout the year. Some animists continued to be concerned about the Christian practice of burying their dead within the village boundary or nearby confines, believing that the deceased's spirit would bring disharmony to the village and conflict with the village spirits because the body was not cremated. In some rural areas, Christians said they were not allowed to use public cemeteries and were not given land for separate cemeteries, so they had to resort to burying their dead on farms or in backyards.

According to an official from a Christian church, conflicts between animists and Christians continued, with reports of family feuds that resulted in damaged or destroyed animist relics. Older animists said they opposed their younger family members adopting non-animist beliefs and threatened them via various means, including government intervention.

Several private preschools and English-language schools received support from religious groups abroad of various denominations. Many boys received instruction in religion and other subjects in Buddhist temples, which continued to play a traditional schooling role in smaller communities where formal education was limited or unavailable. Two Buddhist colleges and two Buddhist secondary schools provided religious training for children and adults. Christian denominations, particularly the LEC and Seventh-day Adventists, conducted religious education for children and youth. Baha'i groups conducted religious training for children and adult members. The Catholic Church operated a seminary in Khammouane Province for students with high school diplomas. The Muslim community offered limited educational training.

Some members of ethnic groups associated with the United States during the Vietnam War era said they felt abandoned by the United States and had rejected Christianity, which they viewed as an American religion, and in many cases in subsequent years had returned to their animist roots. This sentiment reportedly continued to cause problems in remote areas where these ethnic communities placed additional pressure on Christians to renounce their religion, including from their own families and neighbors.

Several religious groups noted they provided donations after a dam collapsed in Attapeu Province in July, resulting in severe flooding and the displacement of residents.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials regularly advocated with a range of government officials for religious freedom and the reform of relevant laws and decrees, including those associated with implementing the 2016 decree, to ensure they were consistent with international human rights standards. In frequent exchanges with MOHA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Assembly's Department of Ethnic and Religious Affairs, and the LFNC Religious Affairs Department, embassy officials discussed the need for swift and appropriate resolution of specific cases of harassment, cumbersome registration procedures, and trends in abuses of religious freedom. Embassy officials regularly followed up on developments with religious leaders and government officials.

In October the embassy sponsored the director general of the Religious Affairs Department at the LFNC to join a three-week program in the United States on interfaith dialogue and religious freedom. Also in October an embassy official attended a four-day workshop on religious freedom in Bolikhamxai Province, organized by MOHA. Embassy officials encouraged the government to continue holding these workshops.

Embassy officials regularly met with representatives from different religions and advocacy groups to address religious equality concerns and to gain a better understanding of the issues faced by minority religious groups.