

2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Cambodia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution states Buddhism is the state religion. 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. A government directive restricts monks from participating in political protests and requires them to be politically neutral.

According to human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the Ministry of Cults and Religions (MCR), continued to exercise control in determining leadership positions for the country's primary Buddhist and Muslim organizations. The government increased the number of Muslims it appointed to leadership roles in local government in areas serving significant Muslim populations and expanded access to halal products made in the country. The MCR continued to consider draft legislation that would impose criminal sanctions on "religious people" for participating in political acts. The government increased efforts to register collective land for Indigenous communities who consider the forest sacred, although Indigenous leaders said the pace remained slow. The government provided funds for Buddhist training and education to monks and laypersons in pagodas, but not to other religious groups. There were cases in which Buddhist leaders defrocked monks for expressing criticism of then Prime Minister (PM) Hun Sen and aligning with an opposition political party. Defrocked Buddhist monk Voeung Samnang continued serving a five-year prison sentence for conspiracy to commit treason and incitement to commit a felony or cause social unrest, stemming from political social media postings.

Indigenous community leaders stated that local businesspeople, in collusion with local authorities, encroached on ancestral land. Muslim Cham community leaders said that Cham continued to have equal employment and educational opportunities. In August, the Catholic Church ordained the first Cambodian priest from the Jesuit order in the country.

The Ambassador and U.S. embassy officials met with government officials to promote religious freedom and the importance of fully integrating religious minorities into society and to highlight the benefits of respecting the country's religious pluralism. The Ambassador and embassy officials visited religious sites and also discussed religious freedom with Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim leaders, and other minority religious groups – including Indigenous peoples practicing animist religions. The embassy increased recruitment efforts from religious minority communities and other underrepresented groups for staff positions and embassy programs. The Ambassador used social media platforms to promote tolerance for different religious practices in the country. To document religious persecution by the Khmer Rouge regime, the embassy continued to fund transitional justice programs that engaged the Cham Muslim community.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 17 million (midyear 2023). According to MCR data in 2022, approximately 93 percent of the population is Buddhist, 95 percent of whom practice Theravada Buddhism, while a smaller number practice Thammayut Buddhism. The remaining 7 percent of the population includes Christians, Muslims, animists, Baha'is, Jews, and

Cao Dai adherents. Most ethnic Vietnamese traditionally practice Mahayana Buddhism, while others are Theravada Buddhists or Roman Catholics. Boston University's 2020 World Religion Database estimates 85.4 percent of the population is Buddhist, 4.3 percent ethnic religionist, 2.8 percent Christian, 2.4 percent Chinese folk-religionist, 3 percent atheist or agnostic, and 1.9 percent Muslim.

Most Catholics are ethnic Vietnamese and constitute 0.4 percent of the population. NGO estimates of the number of Protestants, including evangelical Christians, vary but they state these groups represent less than 2 percent of the population.

According to the most recent government and NGO estimates, approximately 2 percent of the population is Muslim. One Muslim leader estimates the number to be at least 800,000, almost 5 percent of the population. Most Muslims are ethnic Cham, although not all Cham are Muslim. The Cham typically live in towns and rural fishing villages along the banks of the Tonle Sap Lake and the Mekong River, but communities can be found in cities such as Phnom Penh, Kampong Cham, and Kampot. Nearly 90 percent of Muslims are Sunnis who subscribe to the Shafi'i school of Islamic law. Most others follow Salafist or Wahhabist Sunni doctrines; there are also Ahmadi Muslims. A portion of the Cham community also subscribes to the Indigenous Iman-San sect of Islam, combining traditional ancestral practices with Sunni Islam.

According to one Indigenous rights NGO, Indigenous persons constitute 1.5 percent to 2.4 percent of the population, the majority of whom follow Indigenous or animistic beliefs. An additional estimated 0.25 percent of the population includes Baha'is, Jews, and Cao Dai adherents. A representative of the Baha'i Faith stated that there are more than 20,000 Baha'i adherents in the country.

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 government 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 specify the legal consequences should they do so. The law prohibits religious organizations from organizing events, rallies, meetings, and training sessions that are politically focused. A government directive restricts monks from participating in political protests and requires they be politically neutral.

The law requires all religious groups, including Buddhist groups, to register with the MCR. The law mandates that religious organizations inform the government of their goals; describe activities; provide biographical information for all religious leaders; note funding sources; submit annual reports detailing all activities; and refrain from insulting other religious groups, fomenting disputes, or undermining national security. Registration requires approval 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, but unregistered religious groups may not receive an income tax exemption from the Ministry of Economy and Finance.

The law bans non-Buddhist groups from proselytizing publicly and stipulates that non-Buddhist literature may be distributed only inside a related religious institution. The law also prohibits offers

of money or materials to persuade persons to convert. It penalizes acts that constitute “infringement on state religion,” including unauthorized wearing of Buddhist monks’ robes in public, damaging Buddhist religious premises or sacred objects, and “insulting” a Buddhist monk or nun.

The law does not authorize a religious entity to hold title to land, which compels religious leaders to register land in their personal capacity rather than that of their organization. The law requires separate registration of all places of worship and religious schools. Authorities may temporarily close unregistered places of worship and religious schools until they are registered. The law also distinguishes between “places of worship” and “offices of prayer.” The establishment of a place of worship requires that an individual, not a religious organization, own both 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 in a rented location 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. This distance requirement applies only to the construction of new places of worship and not to offices of religious organizations or offices of prayer.

Schools that focus on religious studies must be registered with the MCR and the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MOEYS). MOEYS recommends religious schools follow the ministry’s core curriculum, which does not include a religious component. The government permits the operation of non-Buddhist religious schools which may be either public or private. Secular public schools may offer supplemental Buddhist lessons but must coordinate with MOEYS when doing so. Not all secular public schools offer supplemental Buddhist lessons, and non-Buddhist students may opt out of such instruction. The law prohibits non-Buddhist supplemental religious instruction in secular public schools.

There is no visa category specifically applicable to religious workers. Foreigners working in a religious institution must qualify for and obtain a Type C visa, which allows for a three month stay, and work permit.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

According to several human rights NGOs and in accordance with government policies, the MCR continued to exercise control over dismissals and appointments to leadership positions in the country’s primary Buddhist and Muslim organizations. The PM and the King approved senior Buddhist and Muslim leadership positions.

Senior officials publicly remarked on what they stated was the government’s policy for allowing different religious practices. In one instance, then PM Hun Sen highlighted the country’s tolerance for other religions during the centennial anniversary of Christianity in the kingdom. On March 27, then PM Hun Sen hosted more than 6,000 guests at the 7th National Muslim Ramadan iftar dinner for Cambodian Muslims, the first in three years since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the event, former Vice President of Indonesia Jusuf Kalla, who led more than 100 Muslims to the event, lauded “the harmony and solidarity between different religions” in the kingdom.

There were cases in which Buddhist leaders defrocked monks for what the leaders said was expressing criticism of then PM Hun Sen and aligning with an opposition political party. These actions did not prohibit affected monks from continuing to practice Buddhism, including the right to enter Buddhist temples. In March, authorities arrested a monk allegedly aligned with the largest political opposition party, the Candlelight Party, for staging a peace walk across the country. Authorities subsequently brought the monk to a local temple where Buddhist leaders defrocked him, according to Radio Free Asia, which said the action was unusual. In May, the Cambodian Monk Committee stripped But Buntenh of his monkhood, citing violation of monkhood precepts,

for his criticizing then PM Hun Sen's new title of "Patron of the World Fellowship of Buddhists," a title granted by the World Fellowship of Buddhists on May 2.

Former Buddhist monk Voeung Samnang continued serving a five-year prison sentence for conspiracy to commit treason and incitement to commit a felony or cause social unrest, stemming from accusations in 2021 that he posted messages on Facebook critical of then PM Hun Sen. Voeung's sentence also prohibits any future reinstatement to the monkhood. Observers stated that his defrocking was politically motivated.

As of year's end, the MCR had not released to the public the text of draft legislation, prepared in 2021, that would impose criminal sanctions on "religious people" for participating in political acts, including "organized activity against any political party." The MCR reportedly consulted with religious leaders of several faiths when preparing the draft. Experts who reviewed the draft legislation said the term "religious people" was commonly used to refer to monks and was not further defined in the draft law, making it unclear if the proposed rule would apply to non-Buddhists. According to these sources, penalties in the draft legislation could include up to 15 years in prison.

Then PM Hun Sen presided over a ceremony to mark the 100-year anniversary of Christianity in the country. The event attracted 30,000 Christian participants. Unlike in previous years, the government did not organize an annual interfaith forum, citing as the reason its full engagement in forming a new government after the July national election.

The Department of Halal Affairs, under the Ministry of Commerce's General Department of Consumer Protection, Competition, and Fraud Prevention, continued to oversee production and proper labeling of halal products made in the country. Between January and May, 284 businesses and 1,029 products received certificates of compliance with halal standards, an increase in the rate of approval from 123 businesses and 823 products during the entire 2017 to 2022 period.

The government continued to require all public hospitals to have Islamic prayer halls and to uphold the right of women and girls to wear headscarves at public schools in accordance with Islamic traditions. In September, Facebook media outlet Islamic Information of Cambodia reported that two PTT gasoline stations – one in Kampong Speu Province and the other in Kampong Chhnang Province – had established prayer rooms for Muslims, following 2022 guidance from the Ministry of Tourism.

According to a Secretary of State of the Office of the Council of Ministers, as of September, the government had appointed 12 Muslim deputy provincial and city governors, 49 deputy district governors, 82 district councilors, and 167 commune councilors since initiating a program in 2022 to appoint more Muslims to local government leadership positions in areas with significant Muslim populations.

The Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts stated it continued efforts to register land for Indigenous communities who consider the forest sacred. Local residents, however, said the government was slow to issue land titles, the lack of which continued to negatively affect their ability to protect sacred forests from government-sanctioned and illegal logging or industrial agriculture, and damaging their livelihoods. In September, the NGO Cambodian Center for Human Rights reported there were 458 Indigenous communities throughout the country and the government had registered 8.7 percent of collective land titles for the 458 Indigenous communities, a slight increase from 8.1 percent in 2022. The Ministry of Land and Management registered three land titles to Indigenous communities from July 2022 to June 2023.

According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, in February, the 12 remaining Christian Montagnards living in the country since 2017 departed a shelter in Phnom Penh without notice. As of year's end, their status and whereabouts were unknown. The group, which originally arrived in 2017, sought refugee status after departing Vietnam, but the government did not grant it and in 2021 ordered them to leave the country.

The government continued to promote and officially designate Buddhist holidays. The government provided Buddhist training and education to monks and laypersons in pagodas and gave financial support to the Buddhist Institute, an entity under the MCR that conducts research and publishes materials on Khmer culture and Buddhist traditions. The government did not grant similar benefits to other religious groups.

In July, a Baha'i leader in Battambang Province said the receptiveness of the government and the local population were major reasons for allowing construction of the Baha'i temple in that province in 2017, the only Baha'i temple in the country.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to media accounts, Indigenous community leaders continued to state that businesspeople colluded with local authorities to encroach on ancestral land. In September, an Indigenous community in Mondulkiri Province told Radio Free Asia that unidentified merchants dressed in military uniforms attempted to clear Indigenous land of inhabitants and fired weapons into the air to scare Indigenous dwellers.

Leaders in the minority Muslim Cham community stated that Cham continued to have equal employment and educational opportunities.

Radio Veritas Asia reported that in August, the Catholic Church ordained the country's first Jesuit priest, Father Damo Martin Chour, SJ. More than 2,000 Catholics, local authorities, and clergy attended the ceremony.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and embassy officials regularly raised with government representatives the importance of fully integrating religious minorities into society and highlighted the benefits of respecting the country's religious pluralism. The Ambassador called for tolerance for differing religious faiths and encouraged the government to continue protecting the rights of every person to practice his or her faith without interference.

Embassy officers underscored with leaders of Buddhist, Christian, Baha'i, and Muslim groups the importance of accepting religious diversity, emphasizing the importance of interfaith tolerance in a democratic society. Embassy officers met with ethnic Cham and other Muslim community members, Indigenous leaders practicing animist religions, representatives of the country's Christian community, and Baha'i adherents to understand their perspectives on religious tolerance, respect for minority culture, equal economic opportunity, and integration of ethnic minorities into the wider culture. During these meetings, officers expressed the embassy's support for religious freedom. To support women in leadership in Muslim communities, the Ambassador hosted an event with Muslim female leaders in May and discussed religious freedom and other issues. In April, the Ambassador visited a mosque and discussed religious freedom with Muslim leaders in Battambang Province. In July, embassy officials visited the Baha'i temple in Battambang Province to discuss religious freedom and other issues.

To assist documentation of religious persecution of Cham Muslims by the Khmer Rouge regime, the embassy continued to fund transitional justice programs that engaged the Cham Muslim community.

The Ambassador, through social media, advocated tolerance for different religious practices in the country, recognized the celebrations of Easter, Passover, and Ramadan, and promoted respect for the free exercise of religion on International Religious Freedom Day. The embassy increased recruitment from underrepresented communities, including religious communities, for locally employed staff positions and for embassy programs. During the year, embassy officials held recruiting events in partnership with a predominantly Muslim community organization and continued outreach to applicants from other religious groups and underrepresented communities throughout the country.