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## USDOS – US Department of State

### 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Cambodia

#### Executive Summary

The constitution states Buddhism is the state religion, which 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. In December, the government issued a directive restricting monks from participating in political protests and requiring they be politically neutral. The Ministry of Cults and Religions (MCR), in consultation with religious leaders of several faiths, prepared a draft law criminalizing “religious people” who participate in political acts, including “organized activity against any political party.” Shortly after a March government order that all COVID-19 victims’ remains should be cremated, Prime Minister Hun Sen met with Muslim groups to discuss their concerns about the requirement. Responding to public appeals to allow for religious burial rites, in early April, the Prime Minister dedicated land in Kampong Speu Province for the burial of Muslim COVID-19 victims. Land issues affected some indigenous communities’ spiritual practices. The government continued to deny an Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) request to accept permanently a group of Christian Montagnards from Vietnam who came to the country to claim refugee status.

Indigenous rights groups accused individuals they characterized as “wealthy and powerful” of illegally clearing forests that were religious sites for some indigenous peoples in order to profit from logging or to convert the land to commercial purposes.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials met with government officials to promote religious freedom and to discourage the use of the COVID-19 pandemic as a basis for discrimination against certain religious groups. The Ambassador also used his social media platforms to promote tolerance for different religious practices in the country. During the year, the Ambassador met with Muslim leaders and members of the ethnic Cham minority on several provincial outreach trips. The embassy conducted outreach to minority religious groups – including Muslims, indigenous peoples practicing animist religions, and the country’s Christian community – to obtain first-hand views on the government’s and society’s tolerance of and support for these groups’ religious practices. Some embassy programs focused on the preservation of religious cultural sites.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 16.5 million (midyear 2021). According to the MCR, approximately 93 percent of the population is Buddhist, 95 percent of whom practice Theravada Buddhism, with an estimated 4,400 monastic temples throughout the country. 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, although others have adopted Theravada Buddhism and Roman Catholicism, representing most 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 and NGO estimates, between 2 and 5 percent of the population is Muslim and is predominantly ethnic Cham, although not all Cham are Muslim. The Cham typically live in towns and rural fishing villages along the banks of Tonle Sap Lake and the Mekong River, as well as in Kampot Province. Nearly 90 percent of Muslims are adherents of Sunni Islam, subscribing to the Shafi’i school of Islamic law. The remaining minority practice Salafist, 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 government estimates, 0.28 percent of the population is ethnic Bunong, the majority of whom follow animistic religious practices. An additional estimated 0.25 percent of the population includes Baha’is, Jews, and Cao Dai adherents.

## 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 elaborate the legal consequences for these types of violations. 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 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 cannot 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 religious institutions. The law also prohibits offers of money or materials to convince persons to convert. The law prohibits and 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 “insult” towards a Buddhist monk or a nun.

The law requires separate registration of all places of worship and religious schools. Authorities may temporarily shut down unregistered places of worship and religious schools until they are registered. 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 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 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.

Schools that focus on religious studies must be registered with the MCR and the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MOEYS). MOEYS advises religious schools to follow the ministry’s core curriculum, which does not include a religious component. Non-Buddhist religious schools are permitted and may be either public or private. Secular public schools may choose to have supplemental Buddhist lessons, but they are required to 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 forbids non-Buddhist supplemental religious instruction in secular public schools.

The law does not provide authorization for a religious entity to own land, compelling some religious leaders to register land in their personal capacity rather than that of their organization. There is no visa category specifically applicable to religious workers.

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

### Government Practices

In December, the government issued a directive restricting monks from participating in political protests and requiring them to be politically neutral. The directive came after authorities arrested a monk for being active on social and environmental issues. The MCR, in consultation with religious leaders of several faiths, prepared a draft law criminalizing “religious people” who participate in political acts, including “organized activity against any political party.” Experts who reviewed the draft legislation said the term “religious people” is commonly used to refer to monks and is not further defined in the draft law, making it unclear if the proposed rule would apply to non-Buddhists. Criminal penalties could include up to 15 years in prison.

The government took steps regarding religious practices related to COVID-19 deaths. Prime Minister Hun Sen met with Muslim groups to discuss their concerns shortly after a March government order that all COVID-19 victims’ remains must be cremated. Responding to public appeals to allow for religious burial rites, in April, the Prime Minister dedicated land in Kampong Speu Province for the burial of Muslim COVID-19 victims. The Prime Minister publicly called on followers of non-Islamic religions to support this exemption. The Highest Council for Islamic Religious Affairs subsequently issued instructions to local Muslim councils to facilitate faith-appropriate burials for COVID-19 victims.

The government required all public hospitals to install Islamic prayer halls and formalized the right of women to wear Muslim headscarves at public schools, responding to concerns raised during an iftar attended by the Prime Minister and Muslim leaders in 2019. Three medical facilities opened new prayer rooms in 2021: the Khmer-Soviet Friendship Hospital, the Ang Duong Hospital, and the School of Medical Care. Wearing head coverings indoors is often considered a sign of disrespect in the country, and schools had previously discouraged them in classrooms.

The ruling Cambodian People’s Party, though the MCR, exercised control over appointments to leadership positions in the country’s primary Buddhist and Muslim groups. Senior Buddhist leadership positions were approved by the Prime Minister and the King. In June, the government announced that a top Buddhist leader, Supreme Patriarch Bour Kry, had appointed an online lotion vendor and a fortune teller as personal advisors, a decision which drew strong public criticism on social media, given the advisors’ perceived lack of education and religious training.

In January, government officials and local Muslim leaders serving on the Cambodian Halal Steering Committee formalized a new Department of Halal Affairs under the Ministry of Commerce’s General Department of Consumer Protection, Competition, and Fraud Prevention. The Department oversaw the production and proper labeling of halal products, a move intended in part to help increase Muslim tourism to the country in the wake of the pandemic.

A Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts official stated that the ministry was actively working to register land for indigenous communities based on the land’s importance to religious worship in response to previous complaints about sluggish land registration and deforestation affecting spiritual practices and economic livelihoods.

The government continued to reject a UNHCR request to accept permanently a group of Christian Montagnards from Vietnam who came to the country to claim refugee status. Of the original estimated 200 Christian Montagnards who fled Vietnam and were in Cambodia in 2017, 12 remained in the country after two traveled illegally to Thailand and 13 returned to Vietnam voluntarily in 2020. The government continued to require them to live in a specific area of Phnom Penh. The adults were not permitted to work, and the children were not permitted to attend school. These 12 decided to stay in the country until they receive permission to leave for a third country.

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 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 religious groups, including by declaring government holidays.

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

In April, a report by the Cambodian Youth Network found that more than 3,200 acres of a 7,400-acre protected forest in Kratie Province had been illegally cleared, while another 1,140 acres were under threat. The forest is a religious site for the indigenous Bunong people. A network official accused “wealthy and powerful individuals” of illegally clearing the forests for profit from logging or converting the land to other commercial purposes. Indigenous community leaders reported that individuals and companies who purchased sacred indigenous land commonly hid their intention to clear the land of forest cover, a fact that, if known, would have caused local residents and religious leaders to object to the sale of the land. Sources stated that it was difficult for local communities to prevent the clearing of forest after a sale was completed and payments made.

Observers and religious leaders reported improved public acceptance of persons practicing non-Buddhist religions, although some biases and prejudice remained. Leaders in the minority Muslim Cham community stated that the Cham had equal employment and educational opportunities.

After meeting with Tep Vong, the Supreme Patriarch of Mohanikaya Buddhism, Roman Catholic Bishop Olivier Schmitthaeusler, head of the Apostolic Vicariate of Phnom Penh, reported that there was “reciprocal religious respect” among religious groups in the country and that government policies and social tolerance were instrumental in improving interreligious relationships.

In June, the Roman Catholic Church donated 20,000 masks to the High Council for Islamic Religious Affairs to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. A Council representative expressed gratitude to the Church for demonstrating solidarity with Cambodian Muslims.

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

The Ambassador raised the issue of the Christian Montagnards from Vietnam on several occasions with government ministers and other representatives and encouraged the government to allow their permanent resettlement to proceed. The Ambassador and other officers highlighted to government officials the vulnerabilities that religious minority groups faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic and stressed the importance of actively ensuring these groups are not discriminated against and receive all public services to which they are entitled. Embassy officials regularly raised with government representatives the importance of fully integrating religious minorities into Cambodian society and

highlighted the benefits of supporting religious pluralism. The Ambassador called for tolerance for differing religious viewpoints on social media 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, and Muslim groups the importance of accepting religious diversity, emphasizing the importance of interfaith tolerance in a democratic society. The Ambassador met with Muslim leaders from the minority Cham community to discuss religious freedom and challenges facing their community during a provincial outreach trip in June. He also met with minority Cham community members and graduates of a U.S.-funded English education program in a separate provincial outreach trip in September.

Embassy officers met with ethnic Cham and other Muslim community members, indigenous leaders, and representatives of the country’s small Christian community to understand their perspectives on religious tolerance, respect for minority culture, equal economic opportunity, and integration of ethnic minorities into the wider culture, and to express the embassy’s support for religious freedom. In order to document religious persecution by the Khmer Rouge regime, the embassy also funded transitional justice programs that engaged the Cham Muslim community.

Some embassy programs focused on supporting the preservation of religious cultural sites, such as the Phnom Bakheng Temple in Siem Reap Province.

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Austrian Red Cross  
Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum  
Research and Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien  
**T (Telefon)** +43 1 589 00 583  
**F (Fax)** +43 1 589 00 589  
info@ecoi.net

Contact  
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