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USDOS – US Department of State

2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Cambodia

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 government continued to refuse to allow the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to accept permanently a group of Christian Montagnards from Vietnam who came to the country to claim refugee status. Civil society groups and some religious leaders highlighted what they stated was an increase in religious discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic and partially attributed the cause to a short-lived government policy of separating Muslims and non-Muslims in official COVID-19 infection statistics. In October, the government issued a directive that required Buddhist clergy to obtain physical land titles for pagodas and put a temporary halt on new applications to establish Christian churches. The government also said it was altering registration procedures and creating a new process to reregister existing churches.

The press reported that villagers killed a man suspected of practicing sorcery due to his animist beliefs and practices. There were local media reports that the Buddhist community continued to view the predominantly Muslim Cham and other ethnic minority groups with suspicion as purported practitioners of sorcery.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials regularly raised religious freedom and tolerance with Ministry of Cults and Religion (MCR) representatives and other government officials, including by encouraging the government to allow Christian Montagnards from Vietnam to settle permanently in the country and to ensure that the COVID-19 pandemic was not used as a basis for discrimination against certain religious groups. 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. Some embassy programs continued to focus on the preservation of religious cultural sites.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 16.9 million (midyear 2020 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 adherents. 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 (NGOs) 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 main Islamic traditions represented in the country. Nearly 90 percent of Muslims are adherents to Sunni Islam, subscribing to the Shafi'i school of Islamic law. The remaining minority practice Salafist, Wahhabist, and Ahmadi doctrines. A portion of the Cham community also subscribes to the indigenous Iman-San sect of Islam, combining traditional ancestral practices with Sunni Islam.

An estimated 0.28 percent of the population is ethnic Phnong, 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 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 their 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, but registered religious groups 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 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 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 does not allow non-Buddhist supplemental religious instruction in secular public schools.

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

Government Practices

The government continued to refuse to allow UNHCR to permanently accept a group of Christian Montagnards from Vietnam who came to the country to claim refugee status. Of the original estimated 200 Christian Montagnards who had 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 during the year. 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. The remaining 13 decided to stay in the country until they are permitted 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 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 religious groups, including by declaring government holidays.

On July 24, MCR Undersecretary of State Thor Koeun led a delegation from the Cambodian Buddhist Institute to visit the Chinese Cultural Center in Phnom Penh. Following the meeting, Koeun proposed hosting a joint workshop to exchange information on the two countries’ customs, with a focus on their shared Buddhist traditions.

On March 17, Prime Minister Hun Sen announced a ban on all religious gatherings as part of the government’s pandemic response. After publishing health guidelines for Pchum Ben – a local Buddhist festival – gatherings on August 31, the government allowed Islamic religious gatherings to resume beginning September 5 on a trial basis and under Ministry of Health guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19, such as social distancing and a ban on sharing prayer mats. Christian churches were not allowed to convene their followers until September 11, when the government granted them permission to hold gatherings under the same health-related restrictions.

In March, when the government implemented more stringent health measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the Ministry of Health separated Muslim Cambodians from other Cambodian citizens – into their own “Khmer Islam” category – in official government statistics on COVID-19 infections. After receiving public criticism for singling out the religious minority group, the government began issuing official infection counts with a single “Khmer” category for all Cambodian citizens. There were subsequent reports of local merchants refusing to sell their goods to Muslims and some non-Muslims putting on a mask only when in the presence of a Muslim. Some civil

society group and Muslim leaders pointed to the Ministry of Health’s “Khmer Islam” distinction – along with media reports of large numbers of Muslims returning with the disease from a religious gathering in Malaysia – as having partly caused a perception that Muslims had brought the virus to the country, sparking these incidents of discrimination. On June 9, the United Nations, in coordination with the Ministry of Health, launched a nationwide campaign to combat discrimination and hate speech during the COVID-19 pandemic. After the launch of the campaign, there were few reports of this discrimination continuing.

In October, the government issued a directive that required Buddhist clergy to obtain land titles recognized by the national government for pagodas in what it said was a move to better regulate religious institutions in the country. A spokesperson stated that pagodas had been involved in multiple land disputes in the past and said the move was meant to prevent “future consequences.” The spokesperson also said it would not cost money to obtain the titles. Some monks said they thought this new requirement would be used by the government to exercise more control over monks and pagodas. The government directive also put a temporary halt on new applications to establish Christian churches. The government said it was altering registration procedures and creating a new process to reregister existing churches. The government said this would apply to all religious groups.

Local authorities continued the process of returning 742 disputed hectares (1,800 acres) of land from an economic concession to Vietnamese company Hoang Anh Gia Lai (HAGL) to indigenous communities in Rattanakiri Province, which predominantly practice animist beliefs. In March, local villagers and land rights NGOs accused HAGL of destroying sites on the land earmarked for return considered sacred by the local indigenous communities, including two spirit mountains, wetlands, traditional hunting areas, and burial grounds. As of the end of the year, the government had not finalized the return of the land, which remained under the control of HAGL.

For the first time in seven years, Prime Minister Hun Sen did not host an iftar due to concerns regarding the spread of COVID-19. The Prime Minister conveyed his regrets to Muslim communities in the country on his Facebook page. On April 24, the Prime Minister issued a public statement wishing all Muslim communities inside and outside the country a happy Ramadan.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On June 10, in Ponlork Village, Chum Tum Commune, Krokro District, Pursat Province, Nhim Thim and Pat Ly attacked and killed Prak Bonn with an axe, according to media reports. The report stated that Nhim and Pat accused Prak of having used sorcery to harm them. Local media reported that some members of the majority Buddhist community continued to view the predominantly Muslim Cham and other minority ethnic groups with suspicion as purported practitioners of sorcery.

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. Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ambassador highlighted to government officials the vulnerability religious minority groups faced 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 MCR representatives and other government officials the importance of fully integrating religious minorities into Cambodian society and highlighted the benefits of supporting religious pluralism.

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. The Ambassador highlighted cultural and religious traditions of Muslims in the country and the benefits of religious diversity through a video posted to social media during Ramadan. The Ambassador met with the president of the Highest Council for Islamic Religious Affairs to discuss challenges faced by Muslim communities and encouraged him and the Council to assist any Uyghur or other Muslim refugees from Xinjiang, China, who might seek refuge in the country.

Embassy officers met periodically with ethnic Cham and other Muslim community members to support religious tolerance, respect for minority culture, equal economic opportunity, and integration of ethnic minorities into the wider culture.

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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