

LAOS 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides citizens with “the right and freedom to believe or not to believe in religions,” and a prime ministerial decree states the rules for religious practice and defines the government’s role as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities. The government officially recognizes four religious groups (Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahai Faith), and requires all religious groups to register with one of the officially recognized umbrella groups. Despite efforts by the central government to enforce laws and policies protecting religious freedom, district and local authorities in some of the country’s provinces continued to be suspicious of non-Buddhist or non-animist religious groups and occasionally displayed intolerance for minority religious groups, particularly Protestant groups, whether or not officially recognized. Restrictions on minority religions remained disproportionately high in certain provinces. There were reports of attempted forced renunciations, imprisonment, and detention, for example, for unauthorized meetings. It remained impossible for new Protestant groups to achieve legal status without joining a registered umbrella group. The government does not recognize an official state religion, but it exempts Buddhism from many restrictions. Officials often respected the constitutional rights of members of religious groups to worship within strict constraints imposed by the government. According to a prime ministerial decree, religious organizations must register with the government, religious workers must have identity cards, and people may practice and have ceremonies within the confines of their religious facilities. Individuals who congregate in homes and other facilities for religious purposes are subject to detention, imprisonment and fines, unless the Ministry of Home Affairs registers the location and grants a permit.

Interreligious tensions arose on some occasions among some minority ethnic groups, particularly in response to the growth of Christian congregations or disagreements over access to village resources. The refusal of some members of minority religious groups, particularly Protestants, to participate in local Buddhist or animist religious ceremonies sometimes resulted in friction.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials regularly raised specific religious freedom cases with the government in an effort to establish an open dialogue and encourage conflict resolution. For instance, embassy officers visited rural villages where religious freedom violations were reported. In two villages in Savannakhet Province, embassy officers facilitated town hall meetings with local

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government leaders and village residents to discuss the basic principles of religious tolerance. Additionally, the embassy maintained regular contact with officials in the Ministry of Home Affairs and religious leaders from a wide variety of denominations and faiths.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.8 million (July 2014 estimate). Theravada Buddhism is the religion of nearly all ethnic or “lowland” Lao, who constitute 40 to 50 percent of the overall population. According to the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) and the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), the remainder of the population is composed of 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, as well as among 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, Bahais, Mahayana Buddhists, and followers of Confucianism constitute less than 3 percent of the total population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides citizens with “the right and freedom to believe or not to believe in religions.” It also prohibits all acts that create divisions among religious groups and persons. The constitution notes the state “mobilizes and encourages” Buddhist monks and novices as well as priests of other religions to participate in activities “beneficial to the nation and the people.”

A prime ministerial decree on religious practice is the principal legal instrument defining rules for religious practice. The decree defines the government’s role as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities.

The decree establishes guidelines for religious activities in a broad range of areas. While the decree provides that the government “respects and protects legitimate activities of believers,” it also requires that religious practice “conforms to the laws and regulations.” The decree allows citizens (but not foreigners) to proselytize, print religious materials with permission from authorities, own and build houses of

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worship, and maintain contact with overseas religious groups; however, these rights are contingent upon an approval process. According to the decree, the LFNC, the national agency responsible for religious affairs, ethnic relations, and solidarity with the government and party, has the “right and duty to manage and promote” religious practice. Nearly all aspects of religious practice require approval from an LFNC branch office. Some cases require approval from the central-level LFNC. The building of Buddhist temples requires the approval of the prime minister and the president of the Central Committee of the LFNC.

The Department of Ethnic and Religious Affairs (DERA) within the MHA and the LFNC both play a role in overseeing the implementation of policy, rules, and regulations in relation to religious groups throughout the country. A committee created by the MHA and the LFNC is in the process of examining and revising the prime minister’s decree and updating the legal framework to reflect the current state of religious affairs. The LFNC and DERA establish protocols outlining the shared roles and responsibilities of the government related to the regulation of religious groups.

Both the constitution and decree state that religious practice should serve national interests by promoting development and education and by instructing believers to be good citizens.

Although the decree establishes registration procedures for new religious groups, government policy effectively blocks and precludes new registrations. For example, the government officially recognizes four religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahai Faith. Recognized Christian groups are limited to the Catholic Church, the Laos Evangelical Church (LEC), and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. No Christian denominations other than those already recognized by the government may register, and all Protestant groups must become a part of the LEC or the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Except for Buddhists, religious groups cannot congregate, hold religious services, or practice any other religious activities without proper registration.

Government Practices

There were reports religious believers were subjected to attempted forced renunciations, imprisonment, and detention. The government structure was relatively decentralized, and central government control over provincial and district governments remained limited. The government’s respect for religious

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freedom varied by region and by religious group. Some local officials were unaware of central government policies on topics such as religious tolerance. Even when they were aware of the laws, local officials sometimes failed to implement them.

Both local and central government officials referred to the constitution, the prime minister's decree, and social harmony as reasons for restricting and overseeing religious activity, especially the activities of new or small Protestant groups among minority ethnic groups.

Authorities arrested and detained people for their religious activities. In some cases local officials threatened Protestants with arrest or expulsion from their villages if they did not comply with certain orders.

Persons arrested for alleged religion-related offenses, as with all criminal offenses, had little protection under the law. Detainees could be held for lengthy periods without trial and then released. There were no reports any cases involving religion-related charges reached the courts.

In March there were reports officials in Bokeo Province arrested a Christian after relatives reported his religious conversion to officials. In prison, the guards reportedly forced him to pay for his food as a way of pressuring him to recant his faith and released him after 10 days of incarceration.

In June in Atsaphangthong District, Savannakhet Province, one Christian reportedly refused to take another Christian woman to the hospital and instead he and four other Christians performed healing rituals on the woman. When the woman subsequently died, officials arrested all five Christians. Although four of the five individuals arrested were not involved in transporting (or failing to transport) the woman, who died on the way to the hospital, all five Christians remained detained without charges at the end of the year.

In Songkhone District, Savannakhet Province, officials detained 23 Christians in May for illegally congregating. Authorities released 11 of them after one day's detention and released the other 12 after 17 days' detention. Local authorities reportedly said Christians in that area had not received permission to hold worship services; however, the Christians said they had received permission to congregate approximately one year before from the former village chief.

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In November in Long District, Luang Namtha Province, officials reportedly detained seven Christians for illegally congregating without a permit. LFNC officials reported these individuals were later released after several weeks in detention.

There were reports of officials restricting the right of individuals to hold certain religious beliefs, including forced renunciations.

In October officials in Phin District, Savannakhet Province, reportedly approached Christians in various villages to ask them to sign documents denouncing their faith. Authorities had previously arrested village pastors, and there were reports of threats of further arrest if the Christians declined to sign the documents.

In October police reportedly ordered two men in Nong Luan village, near Hongsa town in Xayaburi Province, to recant their faith, stop telling others about their faith, and stop meeting with other believers in the village and in Hongsa. When the men refused, they were forced to affix with thumb prints a document agreeing to these restrictions. Additionally, a local Christian pastor of Khmu ethnicity in Hongsa reportedly stopped teaching in Nong Luan village after police threats.

In January local officials in Vientiane Province reportedly pressured 27 Christian families to recant their faith. They were reportedly coerced into signing a paper saying they agreed with the officials' demands to renounce their faith.

The government hampered or prevented some religious groups from importing or possessing Bibles and religious materials, as well as constructing houses of worship. Non-Buddhist religious group leaders stated their activities were limited by requirements to obtain permission, sometimes from several different offices, for a broad range of activities, such as congregating, building a church, modifying existing structures, and establishing new congregations in villages where none existed.

In May officials in Donpalai village, Atsaphangthong District, Savannakhet Province, reportedly raided a worship service and confiscated 53 Bibles from worshipers.

Although groups not registered with the LFNC were not allowed to practice their faith legally, several did so quietly without interference. Protestant groups seeking recognition as separate from the LEC continued to be the targets of restrictions,

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and authorities in several provinces insisted that independent congregations must join the LEC. In many areas, however, unauthorized churches were allowed to conduct services without hindrance by local authorities. Both the LEC and the central government denied Methodists' continued attempts to separate from the umbrella of the LEC.

The government required religious groups to report membership information periodically to the Religious Affairs Department of the LFNC.

According to Muslim community leaders, Muslims were able to practice openly at the two active mosques. Muslim Association leaders met regularly with LFNC officials and maintained an effective working relationship with the government. Daily prayers and the weekly Friday prayer proceeded unobstructed, and all Islamic celebrations were allowed. Muslims were permitted to go on the Hajj. The government permitted groups from Thailand to conduct Tabligh teachings.

While animists generally reported little governmental interference, the government actively discouraged 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.

The government typically refused to acknowledge any religious freedom abuses by its officials. Government authorities often blamed the victims rather than the persecuting officials. Even when central government officials acknowledged certain actions, they often said the actions taken by local officials were not based on religion, but on local officials' duty to maintain order.

The government promoted the teaching of Buddhist practices in public schools as part of Lao culture. Mandatory cultural sessions included lessons taught in Buddhist temples. Although the Ministry of Education and Sports stated both that parents may opt out if they were dissatisfied with the program and there was no Buddhist curriculum in any public schools, in practice there were Buddhist lessons taught in several provinces. Christian students noted discomfort with being forced to pray in Buddhist temples as part of the requirement to pass to the next grade level. Sources reported on one occasion local officials threatened to deny educational benefits, including the opportunity to take college entrance exams, to the children of Protestants because of their religious beliefs.

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The LFNC and MHA occasionally visited areas where abuses of religious freedom had taken place to instruct local officials on government policy and law. More often, however, the LFNC's Religious Affairs Department encouraged local or provincial governments to resolve conflicts on their own in accordance with the prime ministerial decree. The LFNC sometimes negotiated with local officials when worshipers were detained for religious reasons.

As many as 200 of the LEC's more than 480 congregations throughout the country did not have permanent church structures and conducted worship services in homes. The LFNC's Religious Affairs Department continued to urge that home churches be replaced with designated church structures whenever possible, and local authorities in many areas considered group worship in homes illegal. Protestant groups, however, reported they sometimes could not obtain permission to build new churches. According to the Ministry of Home Affairs there was a moratorium on permits to build new Christian churches pending new amendments to the prime ministerial decree. Religious group representatives pointed out the building permit process began at the local level and then required district-, provincial-, and ultimately central-level LFNC and MHA permission. They said local officials used the process to block construction of new churches. In a few cases, villages allowed construction of new church buildings without prior official permission from higher-level authorities.

There were reports Protestants in some villages were not allowed to hold Christian services in their homes, thus restricting Protestant activities to church buildings only. This restriction particularly affected Protestants who had not been given approval to build church structures in their villages due to a moratorium on permits. For example, the five Christians who were arrested in June in Atsaphangthong District, Savannakhet Province, after a woman died on the way to the hospital, were detained on charges of holding an illegal church congregation in a building without a permit.

Officials in Xayaburi District, Savannakhet Province, continued to prohibit worshipers from accessing previously confiscated Christian churches in Dongpaiwan village, Nadaeng, Kengweng, and Khamnongsung, citing the lack of official registration. No additional churches were confiscated. Provincial, district, and local officials, as well as DERA and LFNC representatives, participated in town hall meetings with local Protestant leaders and community leaders to discuss the issues involved in the confiscations and seek resolution of the conflict in the Xayaburi District villages. Local Protestant leaders expressed frustration over the

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arduous registration process that led to the conflicts, while local community leaders expressed their desire to use the buildings as a school for all children in the community, regardless of their faith. Authorities did not allow Christian groups to hold holiday services in the churches, and the groups had not received official registration for their church facilities by year's end.

Representatives of Bahai communities in Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Luang Prabang said they generally practiced without interference, and Bahai groups faced few restrictions from local authorities. Local Bahai communities and the Bahai National Spiritual Assembly routinely held Bahai Nineteen-Day Feasts and celebrated all holy days without interference. The Bahai National Spiritual Assembly in Vientiane met regularly and sent delegations to the Universal House of Justice in Israel.

In Savannakhet and Champasak Provinces, Catholics said the government restricted them from obtaining government jobs and being promoted.

The government strictly enforced the legal prohibition on proselytizing by foreigners. The LFNC granted permission for some foreign religious leaders to organize educational meetings, but did not grant broad permission to proselytize without restriction.

The government permitted the printing, import, and distribution of Buddhist religious material, but restricted the publication of religious materials by most other religious groups. The printing and importation of non-Buddhist religious texts from abroad required LFNC permission. While some groups were able to print their own religious materials, the government did not allow the printing of Bibles, and their importation for distribution in limited quantities required special permission.

LFNC and MHA officials frequently traveled to the provinces to encourage religious groups to practice in accordance with the country's laws and regulations. They also provided training to local officials throughout the nation in February, May, July, and October to explain officials' obligations under the constitution and the right to believe or not to believe in religion. During these sessions, LFNC and MHA officials learned about religious law and participated in education seminars that reviewed the basic tenets of Buddhism, Christianity, the Bahai Faith, and Islam from religious leaders.

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While the government did not recognize an official state religion, it exempted Buddhism from many restrictions, including requirements to obtain approval for people to congregate. The government sponsored Buddhist facilities, incorporated Buddhist ritual and ceremony in state functions, and promoted Buddhism as an element of the country's cultural and spiritual identity; it also promoted Lao culture, which included Buddhist practices. Government officials attended some Buddhist religious festivals and Christmas celebrations in their official capacity.

According to the government and religious leaders, in an effort to promote consultation among all stakeholders concerning revisions to the prime ministerial decree, the LFNC and MHA organized meetings for religious group representatives in January in Vientiane. The meetings involved discussion about the government's plan to amend the decree, and provided an opportunity for religious groups, line ministries, and mass organizations to offer suggestions for its revision.

In collaboration with the LFNC, the nongovernmental organization Institute for Global Engagement conducted training for provincial and district officials and local religious leaders in August and October to help both sides better understand each other and the law.

The Catholic bishop in Luang Prabang registered and constructed a church building with the support of local authorities. The church was able to expand charitable activities and provided assistance to a school for the deaf in Luang Prabang.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Christian sources reported interreligious tensions on some occasions among some minority ethnic groups, particularly in response to the growth of Christian congregations or disagreements over access to village resources. The refusal by members of non-Buddhist groups, particularly Protestants, to participate in Buddhist or animist ceremonies continued to be the main source of tensions in rural areas. Christian group leaders, however, encouraged their members to work out a compromise allowing them to support local Buddhist or animist ceremonies without participating in them.

The LEC, Catholic Church, Seventh-day Adventist, Bahai, Buddhist, and Muslim communities participated in social and developmental charitable works.

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Several private preschools and English-language schools received support from religious groups of various denominations abroad. Many boys received instruction in religion and other subjects in Buddhist temples, which traditionally filled the role of schools and continued to play this role in smaller communities where formal education was limited or unavailable. Additionally, 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. Bahai groups conducted religious training for children and adult members. The Catholic Church operated a seminary in Thakhek for students with high school degrees to study philosophy and theology for two to 10 years. The Muslim community offered limited educational training for its children.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officers regularly advocated for religious freedom and amendment of relevant laws and decrees with a range of government officials. Embassy officers also regularly consulted registered and unregistered religious groups.

The Ambassador raised the issue of religious freedom multiple times with the minister of home affairs and officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Ambassador also met with religious leaders and advocacy groups to address religious freedom concerns. The embassy maintained a dialogue with the Religious Affairs Department of the LFNC, and the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Department of the MHA. The embassy frequently informed the LFNC and MHA of specific cases of abuse or harassment. The LFNC and MHA in turn sometimes used this information to intercede with local officials. The embassy encouraged religious freedom by posting relevant material on its official website.

Embassy officials participated in town hall meetings to bring villagers and Christian leaders together with provincial, district, and local government officials to try to resolve conflicts surrounding the right of Christians to congregate in Atsaphangtong and Xayaburi districts in Savannakhet Province.