

CAMBODIA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. Buddhism is the state religion.

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with the government and engaged with leaders of various faiths and faith-based organizations on issues of tolerance and pluralism. Embassy public diplomacy outreach focused on faith-based communities and promoted pluralism through exchanges and youth programs.

Section I. Religious Demography

The population is over 14.9 million, according to a July 2012 U.S. government estimate. An estimated 96 percent of the population is Theravada Buddhist. The vast majority of ethnic-Khmer Cambodians are Buddhist, and there is a close association between Buddhism, Khmer cultural traditions, and identity and daily life. According to the Ministry of Cults and Religion, the Mahayana school of Buddhism has approximately 19,550 followers and has 167 temples throughout the country.

Approximately 2.4 percent of the population, predominantly ethnic Chams, is Muslim, typically living 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 branches of Islam represented in the country: the Malay-influenced Shafi branch, practiced by as much as 90 percent of Muslims; the Saudi-Kuwaiti-influenced Salafi (Wahhabi) branch; the indigenous Iman-San branch; and the Kadiani branch. The remaining 1.6 percent of the population is Bahai, Jewish, ethnic Vietnamese Cao Dai, or members of various Christian denominations.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

CAMBODIA

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. Buddhism is the state religion, and the government promotes Buddhist holidays, provides Buddhist training and education to monks and others in pagodas, and modestly supports an institute that performs research and publishes materials on Khmer culture and Buddhist traditions.

The law requires all religious groups, including Buddhist groups, to submit applications to the Ministry of Cults and Religions if they wish to construct places of worship and conduct religious activities. In their applications, groups must state clearly their religious purposes and activities, which must comply with provisions forbidding religious groups from insulting other religious groups, creating disputes, or undermining national security. There is no penalty for failing to register, and some groups do not register.

The government 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 building and the land where 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. By contrast, an office of prayer can be located in rented facilities or on rented property and does not require a minimum capacity for the facility; such a permit application requires only 20 supporters.

The Directive on Controlling External Religions requires registration of all places of worship and religious schools. Places of worship must be located at least two kilometers (1.24 miles) from each other and may not be used for political purposes or to house criminals or fugitives from the law. The distance requirement applies only to the construction of new places of worship and not to offices of religious organizations. There are no cases documented in which the directive was used to bar a church or mosque from constructing a new facility. The directive also requires that religious groups refrain from openly criticizing other groups, although this provision is rarely tested.

The government permits Buddhist religious instruction in public schools. Other forms of religious instruction are prohibited in public schools; however, non-Buddhist religious instruction may be provided by private institutions.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Khmer New Year, Pchum Ben (Ancestors' Day), Visakha Bochea (a day honoring

CAMBODIA

the Buddha's birth and death), and Meak Bochea (a day honoring the Buddha's enlightenment).

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, according to the Ministry of Cults and Religion.

Some Cham Muslims were well integrated into society, holding prominent positions in business and the government; however, these numbers were low compared with those for other religious groups. Surveys of Cham Muslims indicated they still perceived institutional and cultural barriers to full integration in society.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with the government and engaged Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian groups, as well as leaders of several faith-based organizations, on issues of religious tolerance and pluralism. Embassy representatives communicated regularly with religious leaders and officials at the Ministry of Cults and Religion to emphasize the importance of interfaith tolerance in a democratic society. Embassy public diplomacy efforts also focused on faith-based communities and promoted pluralism through exchanges and youth programs.

The U.S. embassy continued its Muslim engagement efforts, which provided additional channels of information on the status of tolerance and pluralism towards the Muslim population. The embassy continued a scholarship program that provided English-language training for two years to Muslim students, and the ambassador hosted an iftar event for the Muslim community during Ramadan. Visiting U.S. officials included the special representative to Muslim communities, who met with government officials, religious leaders, and youth groups around the country to discuss religious tolerance. Embassy officials and a guest speaker from the United States toured the country on several occasions to meet members of the Muslim community. Several embassy offices also led efforts to hold an interfaith

CAMBODIA

soccer camp and supported various programs to provide educational and social services to the Muslim community.