

# **CAMBODIA 2013 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. Buddhism is the state religion.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Cham Muslims tend to live separately from predominantly Buddhist ethnic Khmer Cambodians and were underrepresented in prominent positions in private industry and government.

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with the government and engaged 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 U.S. government estimates the total population is 15.2 million (July 2013 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 and Khmer cultural traditions, identity, and daily life.

Approximately 3.5 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'i branch, practiced by as many as 90 percent of Muslims; the Saudi-Kuwaiti-influenced Salafi (Wahhabi) branch; the indigenous Iman-San branch; and the Kadiani branch. The remainder 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 generally protect religious freedom. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. Buddhism is the state religion, and as such, the government promotes Buddhist holidays, provides Buddhist training and education to monks and others in pagodas, and provides limited financial support to an institute that performs research and publishes materials on Khmer culture and Buddhist traditions.

The law requires all religious groups, including Buddhist groups, to apply to the Ministry of Cults and Religions (MCR) if they wish to 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 law also requires separate registration of all places of worship and religious schools. Unregistered places of worship and religious schools may be shut down temporarily until they are registered, although MCR reports it has not taken such action. 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 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. By contrast an office of prayer can be located in rented facilities or on rented property and does not require a minimum capacity. The permit application for an office of prayer requires the support of only 20 congregants. Religious schools must be registered with MCR and the Ministry of Education.

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 prayer. There are no documented cases in which the directive was used to bar a church or mosque from constructing a new facility.

The law also requires that religious groups refrain from openly criticizing other religious groups, although this provision is rarely tested.

The government permits Buddhist religious instruction in public schools and allows non-Buddhist students to opt out of this instruction. Other forms of

## CAMBODIA

religious instruction are prohibited in public schools; however, non-Buddhist religious instruction may be provided by private institutions.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of significant government actions affecting 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. MCR confirmed it did not receive any such reports.

Some Cham Muslims were well integrated into society, holding prominent positions in business and the government. These numbers, however, were proportionately low compared with those for other religious groups in the country.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with the government and engaged Buddhist, Muslim, Christian (Catholic, Protestant, and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [Mormon]), and Jewish groups, as well as representatives of faith-based civil society organizations, on issues of religious tolerance and pluralism. Embassy representatives communicated regularly with religious leaders and officials at MCR 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 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 two years of English language training to 49 Muslim students. Additionally, the Ambassador hosted an Eid reception for the Muslim community after Ramadan, during which he stressed U.S. support for individuals' freedom to practice their religious beliefs. In an effort to assist underserved religious minorities to gain access to healthcare in accordance with their religious practices, the embassy provided full scholarships to four Cham Muslim women to earn degrees in nursing and midwifery. Embassy officials toured the country on several occasions to meet members of the Muslim community and discuss ways the Cham can further

## **CAMBODIA**

integrate into Cambodian society while preserving their cultural and religious identity.