

CAMBODIA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of belief and religious worship, provided such freedom neither interferes with others' beliefs and religions nor violates public order and security. Buddhism is the state religion and is promoted through holiday observances, religious training, and financial support to Buddhist institutions. There were reports the government had called for the removal or relocation of Vietnamese temples and shrines, usually citing the failure to secure appropriate permits as justification.

There were reports of destruction of Vietnamese gravesites and continued barriers to the complete integration of the predominantly Muslim Cham people.

U.S. embassy officials discussed issues of religious freedom with the government. Embassy officials also discussed the importance of acceptance and diversity with leaders of Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim groups. Embassy programs sought to promote themes of religious tolerance and understanding through a speakers' series and other forms of engagement.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 15.7 million (July 2015 estimate). An estimated 95 percent of the population is Theravada Buddhist, according to the Ministry of Cults and Religions (MCR). The vast majority of ethnic Khmer Cambodians are Buddhist.

According to government estimates, approximately 2 to 3 percent of the population is Muslim, though some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) estimate the Muslim population to be higher. The country's Muslim population is predominantly ethnic Cham, though 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 branches of Islam represented in the country: the Shafi'i branch, practiced by as many as 90 percent of Muslims in the country; the Salafi (Wahhabi) branch; the indigenous Iman-San branch; and the Kadiani branch. The remainder of the population includes Bahais, Jews, ethnic Vietnamese Cao Dai, and members of various Christian denominations.

CAMBODIA

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution 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 requires that religious groups refrain from openly criticizing other religious groups, although this provision is rarely tested. 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 all religious groups, including Buddhist groups, to apply to the MCR if they wish to conduct religious activities. In their registration applications, groups must state clearly their religious purposes and activities, provide the biographical information of religious leaders, describe funding sources, commit to submitting annual reports detailing the year's religious activities, and agree to comply with provisions forbidding religious groups from insulting other religious groups, fomenting disputes, or undermining national security. Registration requires approvals from numerous local, provincial, and national government offices, a process which can take up to 90 days. The MCR, however, has no authority to punish religious groups for failing to register and there are no associated penalties for failing to register. Registered religious groups receive tax exemptions from the Ministry of Economy and Finance.

The law 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 the MCR reports it has not taken such action. The law's implementing regulations also make 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 property and does not require a minimum capacity. The permit application for an office of prayer requires the support of 20 congregants. Religious schools must be registered with the MCR and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MOEYS).

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.

CAMBODIA

The distance requirement applies only to the construction of new places of worship and not to offices of religious organizations or prayer.

Government Practices

There were reports the government had called for the removal or relocation of Vietnamese temples and shrines, usually citing the failure to secure appropriate permits as justification. Following reports that “Vietnamese worshipers” were visiting religious shrines on Bokor Mountain near the border with Vietnam, government officials formed a commission to search for the shrines and investigate the religious activities of ethnic Vietnamese living in the area. Both government officials and opposition politicians publicly expressed concern about the impact of these worshipers on the country’s culture. In Siem Reap, provincial government officials ordered the closure of two Vietnamese religious sites saying they had grown too large and the congregation lacked authorization to hold ceremonies there. Local officials told reporters that the presence of Vietnamese worshipers caused local Khmers to feel unsettled.

The government continued to promote Buddhist religious instruction in public schools in coordination with MOEYS, although non-Buddhist students were allowed to opt out of this instruction. Other forms of religious instruction continued to be prohibited in public schools. Non-Buddhist religious instruction could, however, be provided by private institutions.

The government continued to promote Buddhist holidays, provide Buddhist training and education to monks and others in pagodas, and provide financial support to an institute that performed research and published materials on Khmer culture and Buddhist traditions.

In June the government issued two decrees, the first of which promised to hire 1,500 Cham teachers, the majority of whom are Muslim and most of whom had been teaching informally in impoverished Cham communities, into the education ministry. The second circular authorized Cham Muslims to wear religious attire in photographs taken for official use, such as passports and identification cards.

The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, also known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, continued to hear testimony related to charges of ethnic- and religious-based genocide against the Cham population during the Khmer Rouge

CAMBODIA

era. The Cham were targeted by the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979) and suffered severely during the period.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In July a video depicting ethnic Khmer youths destroying headstones in a Vietnamese cemetery in Kandal province was distributed widely on social media. Provincial police opened an investigation, which did not lead to any arrests as of the end of the year. As religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize this incident and others like it as being solely based on religious identity.

The Cham Muslim community continued to face barriers to full integration into society. In addition to poverty, isolation, language, and inadequate access to education and health services, some members of the majority Buddhist community and other minority ethnic groups reportedly continued to view the Cham with suspicion and superstition as purported practitioners of “black magic.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom with MCR representatives and other government officials. Embassy officials also discussed the importance of acceptance and diversity with leaders of Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim groups, emphasizing the importance of interfaith tolerance in a democratic society. Embassy officials also engaged Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish groups, as well as representatives of faith-based civil society organizations, on issues of religious tolerance and pluralism. Embassy programs focused on faith-based communities and promoted pluralism through exchanges and youth programs.

The embassy continued several programs focusing on the Cham population. One of the programs sought to help preserve Cham heritage, including religious heritage, through reading and writing instruction in the native Cham language, and included the preservation and study of religious artifacts from the ancient Kingdom of Champa. Through the publication of *Mukva* – a periodical written in both the Khmer and Cham languages – the embassy helped to preserve an important component of Cambodia’s cultural and linguistic heritage. This periodical is the first of its kind in Cambodia and provides information and stories relevant to Cham people. Another program consisted of a series of speaking engagements and focus groups in which Islamic leaders from around the world engaged with the Cham

CAMBODIA

community to provide the Cham with a deeper understanding of the constructive role that other Muslims play in their workforces and communities.

The embassy promoted themes of religious tolerance through youth-oriented Peace Concerts held throughout the country. Tens of thousands of Cambodians attended concerts in Banteay Meanchey, Battambang, Kampong Cham, Kampong Chhnang, Pursat, and Tboung Khmum provinces. Other embassy programs invited Muslims to participate in workshops with guest speakers from throughout Southeast Asia. The workshops focused on interfaith cooperation, community leadership, and conflict resolution. Embassy officials toured the country on several occasions to meet members of the community, promoting religious tolerance by example, by showing respect for Cham culture, lessening the isolation of the Cham, and supporting Cham integration into mainstream Khmer culture. They discussed ways the Cham could further integrate into society while preserving their cultural and religious identity, and lay the groundwork for genuine, long-lasting religious tolerance.