

THAILAND 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution “prohibits discrimination based on religious belief” and “protects religious liberty, as long as the exercise of religious freedom is not harmful to the security of the State.” The law officially recognizes five religious groups: Buddhists, Muslims, Brahmin-Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians. The Ministry of Justice allows the practice of sharia as a special legal process, outside the national civil code, for Muslim residents of the “Deep South” for family law, including inheritance. The Muslim community in the Deep South – described as southernmost provinces near the Malaysian border – continued to express frustration with perceived discriminatory treatment by security forces and what it says is a judicial system that lacks adequate checks and balances. In September the Royal Thai Police requested universities nationwide supply information on Muslim-organized student groups in the wake of the arrest of three ethnic Malay Muslims from Narathiwat Province in connection with multiple bombings that injured three persons during the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Ministerial in Bangkok. The decision sparked protests in the human rights community and authorities postponed enforcement. As in previous years, authorities arrested and detained migrants without stay permits, including some refugees registered with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and asylum seekers. The government’s traditional position on these arrests is that they were not motivated by religious affiliation and that members of a multitude of different religious groups were detained. In some cases, UNHCR-recognized refugees (including those fleeing religious persecution) reported staying in immigrant detention centers (IDCs) in crowded conditions for multiple years. Media and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported during the year that several dozen Uighur Muslims from China remained in IDCs across the country, most of them reportedly in detention for more than five years. In December the government approved a new screening mechanism that provides temporary protection from deportation to individuals determined by the government to be protected persons. UNHCR and some NGOs welcomed the new regulation, but others expressed concern the process may be subject to political interference.

Insurgency-related violence continued in the Malay Muslim-majority Deep South, where religious and ethnic identity are closely linked in a longstanding separatist conflict. Insurgents were blamed for a November 6 attack at a checkpoint in Yala Province that left 13 Buddhists and two Muslims dead, most of whom were village

defense volunteers. An insurgent attack on security forces guarding a school in Pattani in January resulted in the death of four Muslim security guards.

U.S. embassy and consulate general officials met regularly with Muslim and Buddhist religious leaders, academics, and elected officials as part of the embassy's effort to promote religious pluralism and reconciliation and to discuss complex religious issues in society, including ethnic identity and politics. In November the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with Buddhist, Muslim, and Catholic faith and civil society leaders to explore opportunities for and challenges to improve interfaith tolerance and religious freedom in the country. The embassy and consulate general organized workshops on peace and facilitated the presentation of speakers from the United States on religious freedom, engaging Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians in interfaith dialogue on the importance of protecting the rights of religious minorities to preserve freedom of religion for all.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the country's total population at 68.8 million (midyear 2019 estimate). The 2010 population census, the most recent available, indicated 93 percent of the population is Theravada Buddhist and 5 percent Muslim. NGOs, academics, and religious groups state that 85 to 95 percent of the population is Theravada Buddhist and 5 to 10 percent Muslim. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include animists, Christians, Confucians, Hindus, Jews, Sikhs, and Taoists.

Most Buddhists incorporate Hindu and animist practices into their worship. The Buddhist clergy (*sangha*) consists of two main schools of Theravada Buddhism: Mahanikaya and Dhammayuttika. The former is older and more prevalent within the monastic community.

Islam is the dominant religion in three of the four southernmost provinces (Narathiwat, Yala, and Pattani) near the Malaysian border, commonly referred to as the Deep South. The majority of Muslims in those provinces are ethnic Malay, but the Muslim population nationwide also includes descendants of immigrants from South Asia, China, Cambodia, and Indonesia, as well as ethnic Thai. Statistics provided by the Religious Affairs Department (RAD) of the Ministry of Culture indicate that 99 percent of Muslims are Sunni.

The majority of ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese practice either Mahayana or Theravada Buddhism. Many ethnic Chinese, as well as members of the Mien hill tribe, also practice forms of Taoism.

The majority of Christians are ethnic Chinese, and more than half of the Christian community is Roman Catholic.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states that all persons are equal before the law regardless of religious belief and allows all persons to profess, observe, or practice any religion of their choice as long as the exercise of these freedoms is not “harmful to the security of the State.” The constitution empowers the state to patronize and protect Buddhism as well as other religions, but it also provides for special promotion of Theravada Buddhism through education, propagation of its principles, and the establishment of measures and mechanisms “to prevent the desecration of Buddhism in any form.”

A special order issued by the former military government in 2016 and still in effect guarantees the state’s promotion and protection of “all recognized religions” in the country but mandates all state agencies to monitor the “right teaching” of all religions to ensure they are not “distorted to upset social harmony.” A law specifically prohibits the defamation or insult of Buddhism and Buddhist clergy. Violators may face up to one year’s imprisonment, fines of up to 20,000 baht (\$670), or both. The penal code prohibits the insult or disturbance of religious places or services of all officially recognized religious groups. Penalties range from imprisonment for one to seven years, a fine of 20,000 to 140,000 baht (\$670-\$4,700), or both.

The law officially recognizes five religious groups: Buddhists, Muslims, Brahmin-Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians. While there is no official state religion, the constitution continues to require the king to be Buddhist and declares he is the “upholder of religions.”

Religious groups associated with one of the five officially recognized religions may register to receive state benefits that include access to state subsidies, exemption from property and income taxes, and preferential allocation of resident visas for the registered organization’s foreign officials. Registration as a religious

group is not mandatory, and religious groups may still operate without government interference whether or not they are officially registered or recognized. Under the law, the RAD is responsible for registering religious groups, excluding Buddhist groups, which is overseen by the National Buddhism Bureau, an independent state agency under direct supervision of the prime minister.

The RAD may register a new religious denomination outside one of the five recognized religious groups only if it meets the following qualifications: the national census indicates the group has at least 5,000 adherents, it possesses a uniquely recognizable theology, it is not politically active, and it obtains formal approval in a RAD-organized meeting of representatives from the concerned ministries and the five recognized umbrella religious groups. To register with the RAD, a religious group's leader also must submit documentation on its objectives and procedures, any relationship to a foreign country, a list of executive members and senior officials, and locations of administrative, religious, and teaching sites. As a matter of policy, however, the government will not recognize any new religious groups outside the five umbrella groups.

The constitution prohibits Buddhist priests, novices, monks, and other clergy from voting in an election, running for seats in the House of Representatives or Senate, or taking public positions on political matters. According to the National Buddhism Bureau, as of August there were 252,851 clergy who are thus ineligible to vote or run for office. Christian clergy are prohibited from voting in elections if they are in formal religious dress. Except for the *chularatchamontri* (grand mufti), imams are not regarded as priests or clergy and are thus allowed to vote in elections and assume political positions.

The Sangha Supreme Council serves as Thai Buddhism's governing clerical body. The king has authority to unilaterally appoint or remove members from the Sangha Supreme Council irrespective of the monk's rank and without consent or consultation with the supreme patriarch, whom the king also has legal authority to appoint.

The law requires religious education for all students at both the primary and secondary levels; students may not opt out. The curriculum must contain information about all of the five recognized umbrella religious groups. More instruction time is dedicated to teaching Buddhism than other religions. Students who wish to pursue in-depth studies of a particular religion may study at private religious schools and may transfer credits to public schools. Individual schools, working in conjunction with their local administrative boards, are authorized to

arrange additional religious studies courses. There are two private Christian universities and one Catholic-run college, which provide religious instruction open to the public. There are approximately 350 Catholic- and Protestant-run primary and secondary schools, whose curricula and registration the Ministry of Education oversees. The Sangha Supreme Council and the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand create special curricula for Buddhist and Islamic studies required in public schools, respectively.

The Central Islamic Council of Thailand, whose members are Muslims appointed by royal proclamation, advises the Ministries of Education and Interior on Islamic issues. The government provides funding for Islamic educational institutions, the construction of mosques, and participation in the Hajj. There are several hundred primary and secondary Islamic schools throughout the country. There are four options for students to obtain Islamic education in the Deep South: government-subsidized schools offering Islamic education with the national curriculum; private Islamic schools that may offer non-Quranic subjects such as foreign languages (Arabic and English) but whose curriculum may not be approved by the government; private Islamic day schools offering Islamic education to students of all ages according to their own curriculum; and after-school religious courses for children in grades one through six, often held in mosques.

The Ministry of Justice allows the practice of sharia as a special legal process outside the national civil code for Muslim residents of the Deep South for family law, including inheritance. Provincial courts apply this law, and a sharia expert advises the judge. The law officially lays out the administrative structure of Muslim communities in the Deep South, including the process of appointing the *chularatchamontri*, whom the king appoints as the state advisor on Islamic affairs.

The RAD sets a quota for the number of foreign missionaries permitted to register and operate in the country: 1,357 Christian, six Muslim, 20 Hindu, and 41 Sikh. Registration confers some benefits, such as longer visa validity. Representatives of the five officially recognized religious groups may apply for one-year visas that are renewable. Foreign missionaries from other religious groups, as well as foreign staff and volunteers at secular NGOs, must renew their visas every 90 days.

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

Government Practices

Since religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents of violence due to the Malay Muslim insurgency as being primarily based on religious identity.

According to the NGO Deep South Watch, insurgency-related violence from January to September resulted in at least 140 deaths – among them 102 Muslims and 36 Buddhists. Deep South Watch also reported 207 persons were injured during that period – 97 Muslims and 110 Buddhists. For all of 2018, Deep South Watch reported 171 Muslims, 43 Buddhists, and 4 unidentified persons were killed in the insurgency. Local NGOs reported insurgents often considered teachers, along with their military escorts, as affiliated with the state and hence legitimate targets. According to the Chairman of the Southern Border Provinces Teacher Confederation and an official from the Southern Border Provinces Education Administration and Coordination Center, no teachers or students were killed in insurgent attacks during the year. An insurgent attack on security forces guarding a school in Pattani in January, however, resulted in the death of four Muslim security guards.

The Muslim community in the Deep South continued to express frustration with perceived discriminatory treatment by security forces and what they said was a judicial system lacking adequate checks and balances. According to the Prachathai news website, in January Bangkok police detained 16 men from the Deep South working at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport for fingerprinting and DNA collection – reportedly without a court order. All were subsequently released without charges.

Authorities continued to use the emergency decree and martial law provisions in effect in the Deep South since 2005 and 2004, respectively, that gave military, police, and civilian authorities significant powers to restrict certain basic rights, including extending pretrial detention and expanding warrantless searches. Authorities delegated certain internal security powers to the armed forces, often resulting in accusations of unfair treatment by Muslims.

The Muslim news website “M-Today” in April published a report by the NGO Network of People Affected by the Implementation of the Special Laws that said a Muslim religious teacher from the Deep South, Marobi Buenae, was taken by security forces for interrogation and he was detained 34 days without charge.

Members of the Muslim community in the Deep South expressed frustration with a nighttime raid of a private Islamic day school in Pattani Province in January in

which the military arrested multiple Cambodian Muslim students and one religious teacher. The military accused the students of being undocumented Cambodians receiving military-style combat training, while the school stated the students were merely playing and the raid was unjustified. The Cambodian students were deported to Cambodia after authorities found no links to insurgency in the Deep South but determined they were in the country illegally, according to press reports.

According to human rights groups and media reports, many of the refugees and asylum seekers in the country were fleeing religious persecution in their countries of origin. According to UNHCR, local law considered refugees and asylum seekers who entered the country without a valid visa to be illegal aliens, and thus they faced the possibility of arrest, detention, and deportation regardless of whether they had registered with the agency. As in previous years, immigration authorities conducted multiple raids targeting persons living illegally in the country, including some UNHCR-registered refugees and asylum seekers. According to media reports, in July and December Bangkok authorities raided housing units and subsequently arrested dozens of Pakistani Christians, several of whom had asylum seeker or refugee status, according to UNHCR. The government said the raids did not target any specific religious group, and media coverage consistently highlighted the arrests were part of the broader immigration crackdown and not motivated by religion.

Authorities generally did not deport persons of concern holding valid UNHCR asylum-seeker or refugee status. The government generally allowed UNHCR access to detained asylum seekers and refugees. In some cases, UNHCR-recognized refugees (including those fleeing religious persecution) reported staying in IDCs in crowded conditions for multiple years. The government in most cases placed mothers and children in shelters in accordance with a policy to cease detention of migrant children; in practice, such shelters provided greater space than IDCs but still severely restricted freedom of movement.

Activists, including Human Rights Watch, expressed concerns about how the government might react to requests from China to extradite Chinese dissidents, including those associated with religious groups banned in China. Human rights activists reported during the year that Falun Gong practitioners who were recognized refugees in the country were periodically monitored or detained by police. For example, media and activists reported immigration authorities detained Falun Gong practitioner Leng Tao in November. UNHCR assessed the majority of Chinese asylum seekers and refugees, including those in detention, were not at risk of refoulement to China.

Media and NGOs reported during the year that several dozen Uighur Muslims remained in IDCs across the country, most of them reportedly in detention since 2015. In October press reported that the National Assembly's House Standing Committee on Laws, Justice, and Human Rights visited Rohingya Muslims from Burma and Uighur detainees in an IDC near the country's southern border. A Uighur detainee reportedly told the committee that he hoped to be released to a third country but was adamant against returning to China.

The government continued to investigate and prosecute embezzlement crimes allegedly committed by senior Buddhist monks and government officials from the National Buddhism Bureau (NBB). In September Minister of Culture Tewan Liptapanlop informed the House of Representatives that 32 corruption-related cases were completed, 51 cases remained in the courts, and 41 cases were under investigation by the Office of Anti-Money Laundering.

The Court of Justice on Anti-Corruption Litigation in April sentenced Rev. Kitti Phatcharakhun, the Abbot of Lad Khae Temple, to 26 years in prison for money laundering. Since the probes began in 2015, authorities arrested and tried more than 10 senior monks and NBB officials, uncovering the theft of at least 10 million baht (\$336,000).

The government did not recognize any new religious groups and has not done so since 1984. Despite the lack of formal legal recognition or registration, civil society groups continued to report unregistered religious groups operated freely, and the government's practice of not recognizing or registering new religious groups did not restrict their activities. Although registration provided some benefits, such as visas with longer validity, religious groups reported being unregistered was not a significant barrier to foreign missionary activity, and many unregistered missionaries worked in the country without government interference. However, a leading member of Falun Gong reported security authorities closely monitored and sometimes intimidated practitioners distributing Falun Gong materials.

In the run-up to the national general elections in March, some political parties expressed support for easing restrictions on Buddhist monks' political rights. Monks and temple authorities continued to comply with the 2018 Sangha Supreme Council order prohibiting the use of temple land for political activities or rallies, meetings, or seminars for purposes that violated the law or affected national security, social order, or public morals. While at least one monk publicly

advocated the restoration of political rights, there were no media reports of monks defying the Council order by attempting to vote or otherwise participate in other political activities.

The law denying legal recognition to female monks remained in effect despite the National Human Rights Commission's recommendation issued in June 2015 that the government amend the law. The Sangha Supreme Council continued to prohibit women from becoming monks; women wishing to join the monkhood usually travelled to Sri Lanka to be ordained. Of the approximately 253,000 Buddhist clergy in the country, 285 were women. Since a gender equality law exempts cases involving "compliance with religious principles," female monks (*bhikkhunis*) were excluded from gender equality protection by the government. Officials continued to neither formally oppose nor support female ordination. Officials allowed *bhikkhunis* to practice and establish monasteries and temples. Without official recognition, however, monasteries led by women continued to be ineligible for any of the government benefits received by other sanctioned Buddhist temples – primarily tax exemptions, free medical care, and subsidies for building construction and running social welfare programs. Unlike male monks, *bhikkhunis* received no special government protection from public verbal and physical attacks that sometimes involved male monks opposing the ordination of female monks. There were no reports of such attacks during the year, in contrast to previous years.

The only government-certified Islamic university in the Deep South, Fatoni University, continued to teach special curricula for Muslim students, including instruction in Thai, English, Arabic, and Bahasa Malayu; a mandatory peace studies course; and the integration of religious principles into most course offerings. As of August, approximately 3,000 students and 210 academic personnel were affiliated with the school.

Muslim students attending a public school on the grounds of a Buddhist temple in Muslim-majority Pattani Province in the Deep South continued to wear religious head scarves pending the outcome of a case before the Yala Administrative Court on the legality of their attire. The case was based on a 2018 challenge by Muslim parents to a new Ministry of Education regulation that barred students from dressing in accordance with their religious belief and required them to wear the uniform agreed to by the school and temple, without accommodation for personal religious attire. The case was pending at year's end.

According to a senior member of a university in the Deep South, there were no reports of the military scrutinizing Muslim professors and clerics, in contrast to previous years.

In September the Royal Thai Police requested some universities nationwide to supply information on Muslim-organized student groups, including membership numbers, place of origin, and denomination affiliation. Human rights groups protested the action, and the government suspended its request on October 2 following protests by several Muslim organizations, including the Sheikhu'l Islam Office. Government officials, however, continued to state there was nothing wrong with the “routine request” for information, which was reportedly a response to multiple bombings during the ASEAN ministerial in Bangkok in August that were attributed to three ethnic Malay Muslims. Muslim leaders said the request represented religious discrimination because student groups from other religions were not asked for similar information. The leaders also stated the government’s action was a sign of anti-Muslim sentiment.

In May media reported the government canceled a scheduled sermon in Phuket by U Wirathu, a Buddhist monk in Burma and self-described nationalist, after migrant groups voiced concern that his talk could incite tensions between Buddhists and Muslims.

For the October 1, 2018-September 30, 2019 fiscal year, the government allocated RAD a budget of approximately 415 million baht (\$13.94 million) to support non-Buddhist initiatives, compared with 410 million baht (\$13.77 million) the previous fiscal year. Approximately 341.5 million baht (\$11.47 million) of that allocation went to strategic planning for religious, art, and cultural development, including promotion of interfaith cooperation through peace-building projects in the Deep South, compared with 333 million baht (\$11.19 million) the previous fiscal year. The budget included grants of approximately 16 million baht (\$537,000) for the maintenance and restoration of non-Buddhist religious sites of the five officially recognized religious groups and 240,000 baht (\$8,100) for the *chularatchamontri*’s annual per diem.

The NBB, funded separately from the RAD, received 4.85 billion baht (\$162.9 million) in government funding, compared with 4.9 billion baht (\$164.6 million) the previous fiscal year. Of that amount 1.87 billion baht (\$62.81 million) went to empowerment and human capital development projects, compared with 1.6 billion baht (\$53.75 million) the previous period. A total of 1.6 billion baht (\$53.75 million) was allocated for personnel administration, 1.1 billion baht (\$36.95

million) for education projects, including scripture and bookkeeping instruction for monks and novices, and 242 million baht (\$8.13 million) for Deep South conflict resolution and development projects. Comparable figures for the previous fiscal year were 1.6 billion baht (\$53.75 million), 1.2 billion baht (\$40.31 million), and 256 million baht (\$8.6 million).

The government continued to recognize elected Provincial Islamic Committees, which increased by one to 40 nationwide. Their responsibilities included providing advice to provincial governors on Islamic issues; deciding on the establishment, relocation, merger, and dissolution of mosques; appointing persons to serve as imams; and issuing announcements and approvals of Islamic religious activities. Committee members in the Deep South continued to report some acted as advisers to government officials in dealing with the area's ethnonationalist and religious tensions.

Religious groups continued to proselytize without reported interference. Buddhist monks working as missionaries were active, particularly in border areas among the country's tribal populations, and received some public funding. According to the NBB, there were 5,350 Buddhist missionaries working nationwide. Buddhist missionaries needed to pass training and educational programs at Maha Makut Buddhist University and Maha Chulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya University before receiving appointments as missionaries by the Sangha Supreme Council. In July the Sangha Supreme Council announced its goal of dispatching two missionary monks to every sub-district in the country, or approximately 15,100 monks nationwide, with implementation dependent on the availability of sufficient financial and human resources. None were dispatched under this program by year's end. Per government regulations, no foreign monks were permitted to serve as Buddhist missionaries within the country.

During the year, there were 11 registered foreign missionary groups with visas operating in the country: six Christian, one Muslim, two Hindu, and two Sikh groups, unchanged from the previous year. There were 1,357 registered foreign Christian missionaries. Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus had smaller numbers of foreign missionaries in the country. Many foreign missionaries entered the country using tourist visas and proselytized without the RAD's authorization. Non-Buddhist missionaries did not receive public funds or state subsidies.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), which is not an officially recognized religious group, continued to exercise its special quota of 200 missionaries through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Security

Council. Church leaders reported their missionaries who previously received one-year work permits were only eligible for 90-day renewable visas in accordance with regulations applying to all foreign missionaries as well as to volunteers and staff of secular NGOs. In May church leaders petitioned the government to reconsider the new regulations, but government officials advised them to comply with the regulations.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Ethnic Malay insurgents continued to attack Buddhists and Muslims in the Deep South. Approximately 10 insurgents armed with assault rifles attacked Wat Rattananupab Temple in Narathiwat Province on January 18, killing three Buddhist monks – including the temple’s abbot – and injuring another. According to Reuters, this was the first time a monk had been killed in the southern violence since 2015. The attack followed the death of an imam in a shooting attack in Narathiwat on January 11 – the third imam to be killed in shootings in the preceding two months – leading some media sources to speculate the temple attack was a response to these attacks. The Sheikhu Islam Office and the national Human Rights Commission issued statements denouncing the killings of both religious leaders, as did several civil society organizations and Buddhist and Islamic groups. Some local Malay Muslims expressed frustration that the monks’ killing received more media attention than the imam’s.

Military officials blamed insurgents for a November 5 attack at a checkpoint in Yala Province that left 13 Buddhists and two Muslims dead, most of whom were village defense volunteers, according to local press. Following the attack, the nationalist Buddhism Protection Association urged Buddhists to rise up and called for a rally at the Buddha Monthon (Buddhism campus) in Nakhon Pathom. The NBB barred the group from using the venue and issued an official letter to all provincial chief monks asking them not to support the rally or allow monks under their supervision to join it, and to discourage Buddhist laypersons from participating.

The Duay Jai Group, a human rights organization based in the Deep South, stated the government prohibition on Islamic dress in certain schools, pending a final ruling by the Yala Administrative Court, further distanced the Muslim from the Buddhist population. Some Buddhist groups in turn expressed frustration with perceived special allowances for Muslims. In April the group Buddhist Power of the Land sent a letter protesting a special quota system for Muslim students from the Deep South at Mahidol University. A Buddhist group in Yala staged a rally

during which it was stated Muslims received better treatment at state hospitals, including halal kitchens, and called for establishing corresponding special kitchens for Buddhists and special quarters for ill monks. The government continued to deny such oft-stated assertions and in January the Ministry of the Interior issued a press statement refuting claims that the government fully subsidized mosque construction and that Muslim clerics earned a higher per diem than Buddhist monks when performing religious and administrative functions.

In December the group “Buddhism Protection Organization of Thailand for Peace” convened approximately 50 monks and laypersons for a conference in the northeast of the country to discuss Islam’s perceived threat to Buddhism and to deplore the special treatment they alleged the government accorded Muslims. Following the conference the group submitted nine demands to the *chularatchamontr* including calls that the Muslim leader discourage mosque construction “to relieve minds,” stop issuing religious edicts that grant Muslims special protections, and help counter the “radical Islam disease” evidenced by insurgent violence and religious leaders who incite youth to violence against the state. In response, the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand wrote a letter to the House Standing Committee on Religions, Art, Cultures, and Tourism seeking members’ assistance toward reconciliation, but the committee did not respond by year’s end.

Buddhist and Muslim religious leaders stated a majority of their communities continued to advocate interfaith dialogue and cultural understanding.

Buddhist activists continued to campaign to designate Buddhism as the country’s official religion. The Pandin Dharma, or “Land of Dharma” Party, led by Buddhist nationalist Korn Meedee, whose platform advocates making Buddhism the state religion, fielded 145 constituency and 24 party-list candidates, winning 21,463 votes out of some 35 million votes cast. The party platform also calls for the establishment of segregated, Buddhist-only communities in the country’s three southern Muslim-majority provinces. The party’s Facebook page has approximately 10,000 followers. The Dharmmakaya Temple, often at the center of corruption scandals, has longstanding ties to Wirathu, the leader of Burma’s 969 movement, which has been described by leading human rights groups as anti-Muslim, and in December monks associated with the temple traveled to Mandalay, Burma for an annual New Year’s service.

In November Pope Francis conducted a three-day visit to the country, during which his messages of religious reconciliation and interfaith harmony were positively received by Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy and consulate general officials regularly met Muslim and Buddhist religious leaders and academics as part of the embassy's effort to promote tolerance and reconciliation and to discuss religious issues in society, including ethnic identity and politics. In March the Charge d'Affaires met with the *chularatchamontri*, Aziz Phitakkumpon, who served as the country's Islamic spiritual leader, and discussed the embassy's ongoing interfaith dialogue programs.

In November the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with Buddhist, Muslim, and Catholic faith and civil society leaders to explore opportunities for and challenges to improve interfaith tolerance and religious freedom in Thailand. The Ambassador also delivered the keynote address at the Fifth Annual Southeast Asian Freedom of Religion or Belief Conference, where he encouraged grassroots mobilization and the establishment of national roundtables to promote religious freedom as a fundamental human right.

As a follow-up to the embassy's 2018 interreligious program on peace in Pattani Province, the embassy and consulate general in Chang Mai cohosted workshops in Bangkok and Chiang Mai with the NGO Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers. The programs focused on using people-to-people engagement to bridge conflict. A U.S. Muslim associated with the program also delivered lectures on interfaith dialogue to multifaith audiences of Buddhists, Muslims and Christians at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, the oldest Buddhist university in the country, and Payap University, the country's oldest Presbyterian university. Local Muslim media outlets covered the events.

Embassy and consulate general staff regularly engaged with religious minority groups – including Muslims, Christians, the Church of Jesus Christ, and Hindus – through events such as interfaith dialogues to promote respect for individual rights to worship and the importance of religious pluralism, using social media to amplify the importance of these and other meetings and programs advancing religious freedom and tolerance.

In May the Charge d'Affaires hosted an iftar that was well attended by prominent Muslims. The embassy used the opportunity to promote the value of religious diversity and interfaith dialogue. Similar to the reactions from other policy-focused social media posts by the embassy, Facebook posts on the iftar by Muslim leaders generated a mix of positive and negative comments.

In July five prominent Buddhist and Muslim former participants in embassy-sponsored exchange programs participated in an academic exchange in the United States focused on religious freedom. During their three-city tour the participants engaged with other leaders from across Asia to advocate for interfaith dialogue, tolerance, and community development among religious and civic leaders. As a follow-on to the program, the participants organized a regional event in Bangkok in November focused on countering disinformation and extremist messages related to religion on digital communication and social media and increasing voices of tolerance and coexistence.