

# LAOS 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides citizens with “the right and freedom to believe or not to believe in religions.” 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. There were reports of an extrajudicial killing of a religious leader by individuals claiming to operate on behalf of the police. According to international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), restrictions on minority religious groups remained disproportionately high in certain provinces. There were reports of attempted forced renunciations, imprisonment, and detention, for example for unauthorized meetings or unauthorized travel for the suspected purpose of proselytizing. It remained impossible for new Protestant groups to achieve legal status without joining a registered umbrella group. District and local authorities in some of the country’s provinces reportedly 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. 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 (MHA) registers the location and grants a permit. The approvals of several applicants for registration were not granted by year’s end; some have been pending for as long as 10 years.

Interreligious tensions arose on some occasions among some minority ethnic groups, particularly in response to the growth of Christian congregations and other religious groups or disagreements over access to village resources. In an attempt to preserve social norms, tensions arose between some Hmong Christians and non-Christian villagers and government officials, due to their differences in religion, language, and culture, according to reports. The refusal of some members of

## LAOS

minority religious groups, particularly Protestants, to participate in local Buddhist or animist religious ceremonies sometimes resulted in friction.

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 and Bolikhamxay Province, embassy officers facilitated a discussion between village residents on the basic principles of religious tolerance. 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 6.9 million (July 2015). 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 MHA, the remainder of the population comprises 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 (Decree 92) 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.

## LAOS

The decree establishes guidelines for religious activities in a broad range of areas. While the decree states 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 worship, and maintain contact with overseas religious groups. These rights are contingent upon an approval process. According to the decree, the LFNC, the national party 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. The LFNC transfers the responsibility of managing religious affairs to the MHA, while the LFNC is charged with monitoring cases at the provincial and district levels. Nearly all aspects of religious practice require approval from an MHA or LFNC branch office. Some cases require approval from the central-level MHA. The building of Buddhist temples requires the approval of the prime minister and the president of the Central Committee of the LFNC.

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.

### **Government Practices**

There were reports of the extrajudicial killing of a Christian religious leader by individuals claiming to operate on behalf of the police. There were reports minority religious believers were subjected to attempted forced renunciations, imprisonment, arrest, and detention. In some cases local officials reportedly threatened Protestants with arrest or expulsion from their villages if they did not comply with certain orders. NGOs stated the relatively decentralized nature of the government structure contributed to abuses on the part of local officials, some of whom were reportedly unaware of laws and policies protecting religious freedom or unwilling to implement them.

In Luang Prabang Province, assailants stabbed a Protestant pastor to death during a home invasion in September. According to media reports, one assailant claimed to be operating on behalf of the secret police. The pastor had received repeated threats by police to stop spreading Christianity in Chomphet District. Government authorities did not release any information regarding the investigation.

## LAOS

There were reports Protestants in some villages were not allowed to hold Christian services in their homes, resulting in arrests. This restriction particularly affected Protestants who had not been given approval to build church structures in their villages due to a moratorium on permits. Persons arrested for such alleged religion-related offenses, as with all criminal offenses, had little protection under the law and could be held for lengthy periods without trial and then released, according to reports. On March 20, five Christian pastors from Atsaphangthong District, Savannakhet Province were released from prison after serving nine-month sentences on charges related to praying for a dying woman in her home. They were detained on charges of holding an illegal church congregation in a building without a permit. In February the pastors were sentenced to jail for practicing medicine without a license, because they prayed for the woman instead of providing immediate medical attention. According to the Christians involved and an NGO working on their case, after their release from prison they continued to be harassed by village authorities seeking financial compensation for violating traditional animist practices. According to the NGO following the case, six months after their release one of the Christians died. According to reports, authorities denied repeated requests to provide him diabetes medication during his detention, which exacerbated his condition and weakened him to the point of death.

In September two young men were released after serving time in jail for interviewing a village chief in Luang Prabang Province on questions related to religion. The men were conducting a survey as part of a homework assignment for their graduate studies in theology. According to reports, the village chief disliked the line of questioning and called local authorities to arrest the two theology students. The students were charged with “holding a political movement.” One of the students was released within one week; the other was released three months later.

In September police in Khounkham District, Khammuan Province arrested two Christian men in a home raid for spreading Christianity, according to reports from advocacy organizations. The two men had been invited by a Christian family to share a meal and pray for them. They were released after one week without details regarding any charges against them.

In September authorities from Nhang and Don Keo villages in Nakai District, Khammuan Province detained four local Christians and took them to the Nakai district police station where police threatened to put them in jail unless they signed

## LAOS

a document recanting their beliefs, according to media reports. The Christians refused to sign the documents and were later released. Reports state local authorities began harassing the Christians in July, seized Bibles in August, and forbid any religious ceremonies.

Police in Bolikhamxay Province reportedly threatened to banish 45 Christians if they did not sign a document renouncing their faith. At least six families of the 45 Christians were arrested and then expelled by the village chief for not renouncing their Christian faith.

In November authorities arrested three Catholics from Khammuan Province in Attapeu Province for holding a religious ceremony and did not allow friends or family to visit them while incarcerated. The Catholic men were charged with “religious dissemination without permission from authority” and were released after three weeks in detention.

In April there were reports Hintang village authorities in Tapangthong District, Savannakhet Province, threatened to evict a family of nine because they converted to Christianity. Senior relatives of the family threatened to confiscate their land and property, reportedly ordered to do so by village leaders.

Religious organizations reported government policy continued effectively to block and preclude the registration of new religious groups, and registration procedures and timelines outlined in Decree 92 remained unclear. For example, religious organizations reported that according to Article 7 of the decree they were required to “provide a comprehensive set of documents” to the Central Committee of the LFNC “through the concerned local administrative authorities.” The decree failed to mention required documents or the length of the administrative process. Religious organizations reported LFNC authorities asked unregistered religious organizations to register as a subgroup of existing recognized churches, without regard to differences in religious beliefs. The government limited recognition of Christian groups to the Catholic Church, the Laos Evangelical Church (LEC), and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. According to religious groups, the government did not permit other Christian denominations to register, and required all Protestant groups to become a part of the LEC or the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The United Methodist Church, for example, reported it had been waiting for registration for more than 10 years. The Church first submitted its request in 2005. Except for Buddhists, authorities did not permit religious groups to congregate,

## LAOS

hold religious services, or practice any other religious activities without proper registration.

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.

Although groups not registered with the MHA or LFNC were not legally allowed to practice their faith, several reportedly did so quietly without interference. Protestant groups seeking official recognition as separate from the LEC continued to be the targets of restrictions, and authorities in several provinces insisted independent congregations join the LEC. In many areas, however, unauthorized churches were allowed to conduct services without hindrance by local authorities.

Government officials required religious groups to report membership information periodically to the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Department of the MHA, although Decree 92 did not explicitly require it.

In March, in Ala village, Nong District, in Savannakhet Province, the police ordered two Christian families to abandon their Christian faith or face eviction, according to reports. A Christian leader petitioned the LFNC for help, and LFNC leaders went to Ala village to clarify that the two families had the right to believe in any religion. The two families were allowed to remain in the village.

According to local observers and advocates, in July, in Huay Keng village, Xayabury District in Xayabury Province local authorities threatened Protestants with "negative action" if they continued to congregate, which could include arrest, detention, fines, destruction of property, banishment, or physical abuse.

In August local authorities closed a church in Ban Huakua village, Xaythany District in Vientiane. The church had been in operation since 1994 and had documented government approval. Village authorities blamed illnesses on the presence of Christians, and did not acknowledge the individuals' legal protections of religious freedom. Thirty local security officers posted themselves around the church when congregants gathered for services, which prompted many church members to flee in fear, according to reports. Authorities instructed surrounding churches from nearby villages to refuse refuge to Christians from Ban Huakua. According to religious groups, the village authorities made additional threats and

## LAOS

informed the church leader they could no longer guarantee the safety of church members.

According to religious groups, in August the village chief, local security officials and police tore down a Christian's home in Pahang Village, Sop Paow District in Hua Phan Province; the home had been converted into a place of worship and was not registered. The individual informed authorities of the destruction of his home. The incident left the Christians without a place to worship, since they reportedly feared another house would be destroyed if they continued to congregate in a different location.

Officials in Xayaburi District, Savannakhet Province continued to prohibit worshipers from accessing previously confiscated Christian churches in Dongpaiwan, Nadaeng, Kengweng, and Khamnonsung villages, citing the lack of official registration. Provincial, district, and local officials, as well as Department of Ethnic and Religious Affairs (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 villages. Local Protestant leaders expressed frustration over the arduous registration process that led to the conflicts, while local community leaders expressed their desire to use the buildings instead as community schools. 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.

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 MHA permission. In the provinces, local officials reportedly looked to the LFNC for approval. While some groups were able to print their own religious materials, the government did not allow the printing of Bibles

According to religious groups, the government hampered or prevented some religious groups from importing or possessing Bibles and religious materials, as well as constructing houses of worship. Some religious groups reported government officials stated only 1,000 Bibles could be imported into the country. These groups reported that additional Bibles were in Thailand waiting for permission to be imported. Non-Buddhist religious group leaders stated their

## LAOS

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.

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; local authorities in many areas considered group worship in homes illegal. Protestant groups reported they sometimes could not obtain permission to build new churches. According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, a moratorium on permits to build new Christian churches continued, pending new amendments to the prime ministerial decree. The amendments have been in progress for the last three years. 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. In one case, religious leaders reported that provincial government officials refused to allow a new church to be built unless the church funded the construction of a new school. The church stated it was unable to build the new church due to the financial burden of undertaking two construction projects.

The LFNC and DERA within the MHA both played a role in overseeing the implementation of policy, rules, and regulations regarding religious groups throughout the country. A committee created by the MHA and the LFNC continued 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 MHA reported all amendments had been agreed by their ministry, but were pending final approval by the National Assembly. Some religious groups reported the delay was due to the government's pending consultations with countries in the region.

According to Muslim community leaders, Muslims were able to practice openly at the two active mosques in Vientiane, the only mosques in the country. According to the Muslim Association, its 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



## LAOS

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 those responsible. For example, authorities in Bolikhamxay Province reported no knowledge of the case of 45 Christians threatened with banishment from the village if they failed to denounce their faith. 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. Religious groups stated that provincial government officials asked religious leaders not to report grievances to foreigners in exchange for greater religious freedom. Provincial government officials in turn reportedly did not inform the central authority about cases involving religious conflicts out of fear of losing funding and of losing recognition for being a model province. According to religious groups, the central government increased its efforts during the year to keep individuals who had been arrested, banished, punished, marginalized, or had otherwise been the victim of abuses due to their religious belief out of sight and mind of the international community. They said that the government's efforts to maintain an image of peace and prosperity increased in preparation for Laos' chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

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 that parents could opt out if they were dissatisfied with the program and also stated 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.

## LAOS

In dealing with local conflicts involving religious issues, officials at the Ministry of Home Affairs reported they first waited for the provinces to resolve the issue. The LFNC's Religious Affairs Department typically encouraged local or provincial governments to resolve conflicts on their own in accordance with the Decree 92; however, the LFNC sometimes intervened with local officials when worshipers were detained for religious reasons.

Representatives of Bahai communities in Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Luang Prabang reported 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.

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 LFNC and MHA occasionally visited areas where abuses of religious freedom had taken place to instruct local officials on government policy and law. 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 hosted eight training workshops for local officials in Vientiane, Oudomxay, Khammuan, Champasack, Xieng Kuang, and Huaphan provinces 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 were exposed to religious law and participated in education seminars that reviewed the basic tenets of Buddhism, Christianity, the Bahai Faith, and Islam from religious leaders. In December the MHA organized a two day conference in Champasak Province on religious policy, document dissemination, and the division of responsibilities between MHA and LFNC.

The government 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

## LAOS

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, although according to the MHA, there were no funds earmarked towards Buddhist activities during the year.

According to the government and religious leaders, in an effort to promote consultation among all stakeholders concerning revisions to Decree 92, the LFNC and MHA organized a meeting for recognized religious group representatives in October in Vientiane. The meeting involved discussion about the government's plan to amend the decree, and provided an opportunity for registered religious groups, line ministries, and government sanctioned organizations to offer suggestions for its revision. Participants made suggestions that would clarify roles and responsibilities of responsible agencies.

In collaboration with the LFNC, an international NGO conducted training for provincial and district officials and local religious leaders throughout the year to help both sides better understand each other and the law. Religious leaders expressed concern over the confiscation of property in Xayaburi District villages and expressed frustration over the arduous registration process. In January an international NGO conducted training sessions on relationship building with government officials in Feuang district, Vientiane province. In April, May, June, July, and October they conducted the same training in six other districts. In September the same NGO sent a Lao delegation comprised of three representatives from the LFNC, MHA, and the Lao Evangelical Church to a rule of law conference in Vietnam related to religious affairs and regulations. These training sessions were designed to teach local police how to interpret Decree 92 and other religious protections under the constitution.

### **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. In some cases, villagers threatened Christians with expulsion from the village should they not renounce their faith. Christian group leaders, however,

## LAOS

encouraged their members to work out a compromise allowing them to support local Buddhist or animist ceremonies without participating in them.

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. 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. Issues they raised multiple times with the MHA, National Assembly, and officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs included the arrests of religious followers, cumbersome registration and approval procedures, trends and abuses of freedoms, and government management of religious practices in the provinces. 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 expressed concern to the National Assembly, LFNC, and MHA regarding specific cases of abuse or harassment and advocated for their swift and appropriate resolution. The LFNC and MHA sometimes used this information to intercede with local officials.

The Ambassador met with religious leaders and advocacy groups to address religious freedom concerns. Embassy officers regularly consulted registered and unregistered religious groups regarding the arrests of religious followers, cumbersome registration procedures, trends and abuses of freedoms, and government management of religious practices in the provinces.