

THAILAND 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

Although a popular vote approved a new constitution in August, the interim constitution enacted by leaders of a 2014 military coup continued to be in effect at year's end, while the new constitution was pending royal endorsement. The interim constitution does not specifically address either religious liberty or protection from discrimination based on religion, but states, "all human dignity, rights, liberties, and equality of the people shall be protected." The new constitution as drafted provides for religious freedom and equal protection of all persons regardless of religious belief. In September Amnesty International released a report saying the government, from 2013 to 2015, tortured or ill-treated at least 24 Malay Muslim suspected insurgents in the largely Muslim border provinces that make up the Deep South. The government rejected the findings of the report. Human rights groups continued to denounce insurgent attacks on civilians, while also protesting the unlawful detention and warrantless searches carried out against members of the Muslim community. Authorities continued to detain some Chinese Falun Gong and Pakistani Christian refugees and asylum seekers on immigration charges, and released others to third countries. In May authorities issued an arrest warrant for the abbot of the largest Buddhist temple in the country on embezzlement and money laundering charges, but had not arrested him by year's end. Violence continued in the Muslim-majority Deep South where there has been a longstanding separatist conflict in which religious and ethnic identity are closely linked. Following coordinated bombing and arson attacks targeting tourist sites outside of the Deep South in August, authorities arrested suspected insurgents. Suspected insurgents reportedly attacked several schools in the Deep South during the year, killing several civilians, including a student and parent, teacher, volunteer security guards, and police.

During the year, some Buddhist monks regarded as part of the Buddhist "nationalist" movement took to social media to call for violence against Muslims and complained about what they said was the state's accommodation of Islam. Female monks, who were ordained abroad, because of the prohibition of women's ordination in the country, reported receiving death threats. In April the residence of two female monks was set on fire. In the lead-up to the August constitutional referendum, there was public debate over a new provision in the constitution mandating the state promote and protect Theravada Buddhism, which raised concerns among some citizens, particularly Muslims in the Deep South.

U.S. embassy and consulate general officers discussed the parity of rights for religious minorities, particularly with respect to the new constitution, with government officials from the Ministry of Culture's Department of Religious Affairs and the National Buddhism Bureau. In March the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom visited Bangkok and met with asylum seekers from Pakistan, Vietnam, and Burma to discuss religious persecution in their home countries. In order to increase interfaith cooperation and peacebuilding, the U.S. embassy sponsored two centers in the Deep South designed for Buddhist and Muslim youth; cohosted programs with a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) on interfaith and peacebuilding dialogue; and recruited universities to participate in a program to counter hate speech and extremism on social media around the world.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 68.2 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2010 census, the population is 93 percent 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 also 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. The same religious hierarchy governs both groups.

Islam is the dominant religion in four of the five southernmost provinces (Narathiwat, Yala, Satun, and Pattani) near the Malaysian border 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 almost all Muslims (99 percent) 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 2014 interim constitution grants the military government significant power to limit or suppress fundamental human rights protections. The interim constitution does not specifically mention either religious liberty or protection from discrimination based on religion but states, “all human dignity, rights, liberties, and equality of the people shall be protected.”

On August 7, a national referendum endorsed the new constitution, which was still awaiting royal endorsement and had not yet come into effect at year’s end. The new constitution carries over provisions from the 2007 constitution on religious freedom and 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. It also carries a new provision that these freedoms shall not “be harmful to the security of the State.” The new constitution continues to say that the State will patronize and protect Buddhism as well as other religions, but a new provision adds a mandate for the 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.”

On August 22, the prime minister as chairman of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), the ruling military government, issued a special order guaranteeing the state’s promotion and protection of “all recognized religions” in the country but mandating all state agencies monitor the “right teaching” of all religions to ensure they are not “distorted to upset social harmony.”

The law specifically prohibits the defamation or insult of Buddhism and Buddhist clergy. Violators can face up to one year’s imprisonment, fines of up to 20,000 baht (\$559), 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 2,000 to 14,000 baht (\$56 to \$391), or both.

The government officially recognizes five religious groups: Buddhists, Muslims, Brahmin-Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians. The government will not recognize any

new religious groups outside the five umbrella groups. While there is no official state religion, the constitution continues to require the king to be Buddhist and says he is the “Upholder of religions.”

Religious groups belonging to one of the five officially recognized religions may register to receive state benefits such as tax exemption, visa status, or government subsidies. Registration 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 the National Buddhism Bureau, an independent state agency under direct supervision of the prime minister, oversees. The RAD may only register a new religious denomination within one of the five recognized religious groups if a national census shows it has at least 5,000 adherents, has a uniquely recognizable theology, is not politically active, and has received formal approval from the existing recognized umbrella group. The RAD holds a meeting with the umbrella group made up of already-recognized denominations to determine whether the requesting group should receive registration.

In order for a religious organization to register with the RAD, the leader of the organization must submit documentation on its objectives and procedures, any relationship to a foreign country, a list of executive members and senior officials, as well as the locations of administrative, religious, and teaching sites. Registration is voluntary but once approved, the RAD issues a certificate of registration and the organization is then eligible for benefits that include access to state subsidies, exemption from property and income tax, and preferential allocation of resident visas for the registered organization’s officials.

The law requires religious education for all students at both the primary and secondary levels; students cannot opt out. Lessons contain information about all of the five recognized umbrella religious groups in the country. Students who wish to pursue in-depth studies of a particular religion may study at a private religious school and can transfer credits to the public school. Individual schools, working in conjunction with their local administrative boards, are authorized to arrange additional religious studies courses. There are two private Christian universities open to the public with religious curricula. There are additionally 10 Catholic grade schools whose curriculum and registration the Ministry of Education oversees. The Sangha Supreme Council serves as Thai Buddhism’s governing clerical body. The Sangha Supreme Council and the Central Islamic Committee of

Thailand create special curricula for Buddhist and Islamic studies required in public schools.

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

The constitution continues to prohibit Buddhist priests, novices, monks, and other clergy from voting in an election or running for seats in the House of Representatives or Senate. According to the National Buddhism Bureau, as of December 2015, there are over 40,000 Buddhist temples in the country with approximately 360,000 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 *chularajmontri* (grand mufti) himself, imams are not regarded as priests or clergy and are thus allowed to vote in elections and assume political positions.

The Ministry of Justice allows the practice of sharia as a special legal process, outside of the national civil code, for family law, including inheritance, for Muslim residents of the Deep South. 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 *chularajmontri*, who the king appoints as the state advisor on Islamic affairs.

The RAD sets a quota based on census figures on religious populations by the National Statistics Office for the number of foreign missionaries permitted to register and operate in the country: 1,560 Christian, 6 Muslim, 20 Hindu, and 41 Sikh. Registration confers some benefits, such as longer visa validity.

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

Government Practices

Since the 2004 escalation of violence in the Deep South, approximately 6,700 Buddhists and Muslims have been killed, and another 12,000 injured with slightly more Muslims than Buddhists among the killed and injured. There were reports 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 pretrial detention and searches without warrant. Authorities delegated certain internal security powers to the armed forces, often resulting in accusations of unfair treatment. Human rights organizations reported the government continued to arrest suspected Malay Muslim militants, some of them juveniles, and in some cases held them for a month or more under emergency decree and martial law provisions. Human rights groups continued to denounce insurgent attacks on civilians while also protesting the reported torture and warrantless searches authorities carried out against members of the Muslim community.

In September Amnesty International released a report saying the military tortured or ill-treated at least 24 Malay Muslim suspected insurgents in the Deep South between 2013 and 2015, including incidents of waterboarding, suffocation with plastic bags, strangulation, and beatings. The government rejected the findings of the report and subsequently warned Amnesty International in advance of the report's public rollout that its local staff and representatives could be arrested and prosecuted for visa violations; Amnesty International subsequently cancelled its public launch of the report in Bangkok.

After August bombings and arson attacks in tourist areas outside the traditional conflict zone in the Deep South, the NCPO increased investigation and arrests of suspected insurgents. The four victims killed and most of the 36 injured in the attacks were Thais. Two suspects were arrested and undergoing trial in a military court as of year's end. A reported October bomb plot near Bangkok resulted in the arrest of at least 44 Malay Muslim students and youth, almost all of whom were released shortly afterwards. Human rights organizations said these arrests were arbitrary and illegal.

Authorities conducted large-scale raids to track down immigrants overstaying their visas. Among them, reportedly thousands of Pakistani Christian refugees, some of whom were registered by the United Nations as asylum seekers, and others who were undocumented, faced detention in crowded detention centers and often waited

years for resettlement. Those without asylum-seeking status faced eventual deportation. Because the country is not a party to the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, even UN-designees may be considered to be in the country illegally; as a result, authorities have reportedly routinely arrested, detained, and sometimes deported asylum seekers, many of whom said they face religious persecution in their home countries.

Since the 2014 military coup, authorities have arrested on immigration charges over 29 of the approximately 160 practitioners of Falun Gong who sought asylum in the country from China, raising concerns from human rights organizations. In 2015, a Supreme Administrative Court ruling allowed the Falun Gong to register as an NGO. Activists, however, said they feared the Thai government was assisting with requests to extradite Chinese dissidents to forge closer ties with Beijing. Many of the Falun Gong practitioners who entered Thailand undocumented and await resettlement after attaining refugee status through the UN said they could still be arrested and repatriated. A Thai government spokesperson said the government had increased law enforcement efforts against illegal entrants or those who had overstayed their visas.

In May police issued a warrant for the arrest of Abbot Chaiyaboon Dhammajayo of the Dhammakaya Temple (the largest Buddhist temple in the country), the head of the fastest growing Buddhist movement in the world, for embezzlement and money laundering in connection with what authorities said were fraudulent donations. Authorities, however, had been unable to charge him formally as the abbot did not appear for court summons and his whereabouts remained unknown. His supporters said his failure to appear was due to illness. In December Dhammajayo, whose supporters wanted him named Supreme Patriarch, was demoted from Abbot of the Dhammakaya Temple to an honorary abbot by an official Sangha directive and relieved of his official duties on grounds of his prolonged illness. The investigation into Dhammajayo drew worldwide protests and his followers said the abbot was targeted because the popularity of his temple threatened the country's political and religious elite. Supporters said the charges and investigation were ill-founded and politically motivated because of reports that the movement had links to a former, deposed prime minister.

Since 1984, the government has not recognized any new religious groups. 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.

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 360,000 Buddhist clergy in the country, only 100 were women. Because a gender equality law exempts cases involving “compliance with religious principles,” female monks (*bhikkhunis*) were excluded from gender equality legal protection by the government. The issue of female monks and other Buddhist internal governance issues were outside the government’s jurisdiction. Officials have neither formally opposed nor supported female ordination and have 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 exemption, free medical care, and subsidies for building construction and running social welfare programs. Some *bhikkhunis* expressed concern a new provision in the draft constitution passed in August on the government’s duty to protect and promote Theravada Buddhism could further curtail the rights of women to practice freely as monks. Government officials reportedly threatened some *bhikkhunis* with arrest on charges of impersonating a monk. Under the law, *bhikkhunis* also receive no special government protection from public attacks as is usually provided to monks.

The first *bhikkhuni* ordained by going abroad, Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, Abbess of the Songdhammakalyani Monastery, has led a movement advocating for recognizing *bhikkhunis* and allowing their ordination within the country. Her movement continued to encounter resistance. In December the abbess led a group of 72 *bhikkhunis* and novices to the Grand Palace in Bangkok to attend royal funeral rites for the late King Bhumibol. When they attempted to enter the palace through the monks’ gate, representatives from the National Buddhism Bureau and a Buddhist university reprimanded them for wearing monks’ robes and directed them to disrobe and enter through the laypersons’ entrance.

The predominantly Muslim Deep South voted against the NCPO’s draft constitution in August. According to civil society experts, the Deep South’s opposing vote was a result of their belief that the new charter’s clause on religion would weaken religious tolerance. Many within the Muslim community said it viewed the specific provision to promote and protect Buddhism as an effort by the NCPO to accommodate the powerful Buddhist lobby that campaigned for government support of Buddhism as the state religion. Muslims and some Buddhists, including *bhikkhuni* and non-Theravada Buddhists said, however, they were concerned the explicit constitutional protection of Theravada Buddhism

signaled government support for a monolithic interpretation of Buddhist doctrine and practice, which would fail to protect other Buddhist denominations and non-Buddhist groups.

The NCPO's special order of August 22 required authorities (including the Sangha Supreme Council, National Buddhism Bureau, the Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Interior, the National Security Council, and the Southern Border Provinces Administration Center) to present measures to the cabinet by the end of the year promoting mutual understanding and reconciliation among people of different religious faiths as a way to reassure the public that religious freedoms would be secure under the new constitution. According to officials at the National Buddhism Bureau, the joint committee had completed its draft of measures, which was pending cabinet and NCPO approval at year's end.

The only Islamic government-certified full university in the Deep South, Fatoni University, continued to teach special curricula for Muslim students. Approximately 3,600 students and 400 academic personnel were affiliated with the school as of the end of the year.

According to human rights organizations, Muslim professors and clerics, particularly in the southernmost provinces, faced additional scrutiny because of continuing government concern about Malay Muslim separatist activities.

In July the Bangkok Civil Court ordered the closure of an Islamic school in Narathiwat Province in the Deep South for what authorities said was support of the Malay-Muslim separatist movement. This was the second shutdown of an Islamic school in the region since 2015; the Office of Education Administration estimated that 10 Islamic schools were shut down during the year. Following a September bomb attack in Tak Bai District, Narathiwat Province reportedly carried out by insurgents, local authorities increased security at 111 schools in the Deep South, setting up security checkpoints along main roads to check for weapons, and deploying police and military to the schools. There were other incidents, including shootings, bombings, and arson, in the province following the September attack. Police in Pattani Province continue to escort teachers to schools for their safety.

There were 80 royal projects underway for the Muslim community as of the end of the year, some of which were to be executed or completed by the NCPO. Among those initiated by the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej were the first translation of the Quran into Thai and the construction of Muslim centers funded by royal subsidies. Despite the king's constitutional role as the defender of the Buddhist

faith, the monarch has also traditionally played a significant role as a promoter of religious tolerance, according to representatives of the Muslim community.

The government allocated approximately 399 million baht (\$11.2 million) for the fiscal year (October 1-September 30) to the RAD as an agency under the Ministry of Culture. About 367 million baht (\$10.3 million) of that went to strategic planning for religious, art, and cultural development. The budget included grants of approximately 20 million baht (\$560,000) to subsidize Islamic affairs; 18 million baht (\$503,000) for the maintenance and restoration of non-Buddhist religious sites of the five officially recognized religious groups; and over 2 million baht (\$56,000) to subsidize Christian, Brahmin, Hindu, and Sikh affairs. Religious groups submitted budget requests and received approval by the RAD based on population size reported in the national census. The RAD fiscal year budget also included allocations for religious lectures, Buddhist Sunday school, Islamic study centers, religious activities for persons with disabilities, and interfaith events. The government also provided funds to promote and facilitate Muslim participation in the Hajj.

The National Buddhism Bureau, funded separately from the RAD, received 5.3 billion baht (\$148 million). The majority of that budget, 3.5 billion baht (\$98 million), went to the preservation, promotion, and development of religious art and culture. 1.6 billion (\$45 million) was allocated to projects for education management. 262 million baht (\$7.3 million) was allocated to Deep South conflict resolution and development projects.

The government continued to recognize 39 elected Provincial Islamic Committees 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 southernmost provinces reported acting as advisers to government officials in dealing with the area's ethnic and religious conflicts.

Religious groups proselytized without reported interference. Thai 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 National Buddhism Bureau, there were 5,161 Buddhist missionaries working nationwide. Buddhist missionaries must pass training and educational programs at Mahi Makut Buddhist University and Mahi Chulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya University before receiving appointments as missionaries by the Sangha Supreme

Council. No foreign monks are permitted to serve as Buddhist missionaries within the country.

Muslim and Christian missionaries did not receive public funds or state subsidies. Islamic organizations had small numbers of citizens working as missionaries in the country. Christian organizations across all denominations had larger numbers of missionaries, both foreigners and nationals, operating in the country. Sikhs and Hindus had smaller numbers of missionaries.

There were 11 registered foreign missionary groups that operated in the country during the year: six Christian denominations, one Muslim, two Hindu, and two Sikh groups. There were 1,560 registered foreign Christian missionary organizations. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), which is not an officially recognized Christian group, has obtained a special quota for 200 missionaries through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Security Council. Many unregistered missionaries, however, lived and worked in the country without government interference. Although registration provided some benefits, such as visas with longer validity, religious groups reported that being unregistered was not a significant barrier to foreign missionary activity. Many foreign missionaries entered the country using tourist visas and proselytized without the RAD's authorization.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents of violence as being solely based on religious identity.

According to the NGO Deep South Watch, 307 people were killed and 628 injured during the year (a slight increase from the previous year) in the conflict in the southernmost provinces. Of those killed, almost 75 percent were civilians, over 60 percent were Muslim, and almost 35 percent were Buddhist. The insurgents reportedly carried out the violence represented different groups, mostly ethnic Malay Muslim, and all advocated restoring the Pattani Sultanate that once occupied what are now the southernmost provinces.

Muslim insurgents continued to target government schools which teach both a Muslim and national curriculum that insurgents reportedly perceived as imposing Thai Buddhist culture and attempting to assimilate the Malay Muslim population. Insurgents reportedly often considered teachers, along with their military escorts, to be affiliated with the state and hence legitimate targets. The first school-related

attack of the year occurred in Panarea District, Pattani Province on June 27, injuring a school security official. On September 6, a bombing attack outside a school in Narathiwat Province killed a father and his four-year-old daughter and injured at least 10 other civilian adults including teachers, parents, and traffic officers. By the end of the year, there were three additional attacks targeting security officials, civilian defense volunteers, and teachers at government schools in the Deep South, resulting in two more deaths and multiple injuries.

Nineteen monks have been killed or wounded since 2009 and none were killed during the year. One imam was shot and killed in Pattani Province on June 26 during the spate of violent attacks that occur annually during the month of Ramadan. The day after the end of Ramadan, two separate bomb attacks near the Pattani Central Mosque and the Bannang Sata Mosque in Yala Province killed a police officer and a villager, and injured others.

A bombing outside a noodle shop in downtown Pattani on October 25 killed a Thai Buddhist woman and injured 18 others, including several children. The attack occurred on the anniversary of the deaths of 85 Thai Muslims during an antigovernment protest in 2004.

According to human rights and civil society groups, a decade of constant violence has decreased interaction between the Muslim and Buddhist communities.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Violence in the Deep South hindered the ability of individuals to practice the full range of religious activities, according to human rights organizations.

According to media reports, anti-Muslim media attacks in the northern provinces have deepened tensions between Buddhists and Muslims throughout the country, and while there were no reported incidents of conflict outside of the Deep South other than the attacks in August, there were increasing reports of anti-Muslim sentiment online. For example, some Buddhist monks regarded as part of the Buddhist “nationalist” movement used social media to call for violence against Muslims and complained about what they said was the state’s accommodation of Islam. The government made efforts to remove inflammatory content posted on Facebook and other social media platforms online. Some observers stated that extremism and radicalization among the Buddhist community were increasing, fueled by anti-Muslim sentiment and, according to religious studies experts, seldom reported. Others stated the majority of the Buddhist community continued

to advocate for interfaith dialogue and cultural understanding between the Buddhist and Muslim communities.

There was public debate about Buddhism in the lead-up to the national vote on the new constitution, which passed on August 7 and is expected to be enacted in 2017, particularly on the mandated special promotion of Theravada Buddhism. The nongovernmental Committee to Promote Buddhism as the State Religion formed in late 2015, lobbied during the year for the government to make Buddhism the state religion in the new constitution. The committee, led by Buddhist activists and academics, included a mixture of laypersons, monks, and government retirees among its reported 100,000 members. The committee said it viewed the new provision promoting and protecting Theravada Buddhism as a partial success. Religious scholars and experts, however, said they believed the advocacy of Buddhism as the state religion was not solely based on what they said was potentially a growing anti-Muslim sentiment but was prompted also by fears of the decline of Buddhism through corruption, secularization, and social changes that they saw as weakening Buddhist values throughout the country.

In late January monks and representatives of elected government bodies from 25 districts in Chiang Mai met to oppose an attempt to revive the “Halal Industrial Zone” project by the Chiang Mai Islamic Committee. Twelve Buddhist organizations submitted a letter to the governor of Chiang Mai in February opposing the establishment of the halal zone, saying it would destroy the cultural heritage of the area. No subsequent decisions were made about whether to continue or cancel the project.

As the population of *bhikkhunis* has risen, they have reported increasingly receiving death threats, and were often viewed as insurgents by the Buddhist clergy. In April arsonists set fire to the residence of two *bhikkhunis* and reportedly targeted the women living there because they were female monks. Staff members employed at the residence, however, stated the *bhikkhunis* were likely targeted not because they were female monks, but because of opposition to social welfare support the *bhikkhunis* were providing to some members of the local community.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy and consulate general officers and visiting high-level officials discussed religious freedom with government officials from the Ministry of Culture’s Department of Religious Affairs, and with the National Buddhism

Bureau. They raised the importance of mutual respect and parity of rights for religious minorities, especially in regard to the drafting of the new constitution.

Embassy and consulate officers regularly visited Muslim and Buddhist religious leaders, academics, and elected officials as part of the embassy's effort to promote tolerance and reconciliation regarding complex religious issues in society.

In March the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom visited Bangkok where he met with asylum seekers in the country, including Pakistani Christians, Vietnamese Montagnard Christians, and Rohingya Muslims from Burma to discuss their refugee statuses and issues with religious persecution that they faced in their home countries.

The U.S. embassy sponsored two centers in Pattani and Yala Provinces in the Deep South, which served as platforms for peace building and conflict mitigation projects targeting Buddhist and Muslim youth. Collaborating with a local NGO, the embassy hosted programs on interfaith and peacebuilding dialogue. The embassy also recruited a number of Thai universities to participate in a program co-sponsored by the State Department and Facebook to push back on hate speech and extremism around the world.

The embassy continued two initiatives to improve the capacity of local civil society to aid in the process of peacebuilding. The first initiative focused on building trust between Muslims and Buddhists in six communities in Yala Province through youth leadership and community activities. The second focused on using person-to-person engagement to bridge conflict from the bottom up.

The embassy and consulate also regularly engaged with media outlets associated with religious minority groups, and reached out to hill tribes and Muslim communities throughout the country with messages supporting religious freedom, including respect for individual rights and the importance of religious pluralism.