

CAMBODIA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of belief and religious worship, with the caveat that it not affect others' beliefs and religions nor violate public order and security. Buddhism is the state religion and is promoted through holiday observances, religious training, and financial support to Buddhist institutions.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

The U.S. embassy promoted religious freedom with the government and discussed acceptance and diversity with leaders of various faiths. Embassy programs sought to preserve aspects of the minority Cham Muslims' heritage, and also promoted themes of tolerance and understanding through a speakers' series with visiting Muslim leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population is 15.5 million (July 2014 estimate). An estimated 96 percent of the population is Theravada Buddhist. The vast majority of ethnic Khmer Cambodians are Buddhist and there is a close association between Buddhism and Khmer cultural traditions, identity, and daily life.

Approximately 2.5 percent of the population, predominantly ethnic Chams, is Muslim, typically living in towns and rural fishing villages on the banks of the Tonle Sap Lake and the Mekong River, as well as in Kampot Province. The Cham were targeted during the Khmer Rouge era and suffered a much higher death toll than the rest of the Khmer population. There are four branches of Islam represented in the country: the Malay-influenced Shafi'i branch, practiced by as many as 90 percent of Muslims; the Saudi-Kuwaiti-influenced Salafi (Wahhabi) branch; the indigenous Iman-San branch; and the Kadiani branch. The remainder of the population includes Bahais, Jews, ethnic Vietnamese Cao Dai, and members of various Christian denominations.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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The constitution provides for freedom of belief and religious worship, with the caveat that it not affect others' beliefs and religions nor violate public order and security. Although the constitution establishes Buddhism as the state religion and provides for state support of Buddhist education, it prohibits discrimination based on religion. The law requires that religious groups refrain from openly criticizing other religious groups, although this provision is rarely tested.

The law requires all religious groups, including Buddhist groups, to apply to the Ministry of Cults and Religions (MCR) if they wish to conduct religious activities. In their applications, groups must state clearly their religious purposes and activities, which must comply with provisions forbidding religious groups from insulting other religious groups, creating disputes, or undermining national security. The MCR, however, has no authority to punish religious groups for failing to register and there are no associated penalties for failing to register. Registered religious groups receive tax exemptions from the Ministry of Economy and Finance, although some groups still do not register.

The law also requires separate registration of all places of worship and religious schools. Unregistered places of worship and religious schools may be shut down temporarily until they are registered, although the MCR reports it has not taken such action. The government makes a legal distinction between "places of worship" and "offices of prayer." The establishment of a place of worship requires that the founders own the building and the land on which it is located. The facility must have a minimum capacity of 200 persons, and the permit application requires the support of at least 100 congregants. By contrast, an office of prayer can be located in rented facilities or on rented property and does not require a minimum capacity. The permit application for an office of prayer requires the support of only 20 congregants. Religious schools must be registered with the MCR and the Ministry of Education.

Places of worship must be located at least two kilometers (1.2 miles) from each other and may not be used for political purposes or to house criminals or fugitives. The distance requirement applies only to the construction of new places of worship and not to offices of religious organizations or prayer. There are no documented cases in which the government used the directive to bar a group from constructing a new facility.

Government Practices

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In cases of disputes based on religion not involving actions covered under the Penal Code, the MCR could officially invite both parties to discussions and seek a solution. The MCR could also issue first and second official warnings to the parties involved in the disputes and ultimately lift their registration licenses if the disputes persisted. In practice, however, no religious disputes have ever been brought to the MCR.

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

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to MCR, there were no reported grievances from the Cham population. Some Cham Muslims were well integrated into society, holding prominent positions in business and the government. These numbers, however, were proportionately low compared with those for other religious groups in the country.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with the government. Embassy representatives communicated regularly with officials at the MCR and religious leaders to emphasize the importance of interfaith tolerance in a democratic society. Embassy officials also engaged Buddhist, Muslim, Christian (Catholic, Protestant, and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [Mormon]), and Jewish groups, as well as representatives of faith-based civil society organizations, on issues of religious tolerance and pluralism. Embassy public diplomacy efforts focused on faith-based communities and promoted pluralism through exchanges and youth programs.

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The embassy continued its Muslim engagement efforts with two programs directly targeted at Cambodia's Cham population. The first program sought to help preserve Cham heritage, including religious heritage, through reading and writing instruction in the native Cham language, and included the preservation and study of cultural and some religious relics from the ancient Kingdom of Champa. There were approximately 600 students enrolled. The other program consisted of a series of speaking engagements and focus groups in which Muslim leaders from around the world engaged with the Cham community to provide the Cham with a deeper understanding of the constructive role that other Muslims play in their workforces and communities. Additionally, the Ambassador joined an iftar reception for the Muslim community hosted for the first time by Prime Minister Hun Sen.

The embassy's continued scholarship support to four Cham Muslim women to earn degrees in nursing and midwifery will help the Cham to receive health care in accordance with their religious beliefs. Embassy officials toured the country on several occasions to meet members of the Muslim community and discussed ways the Cham could further integrate into society while preserving their cultural and religious identity.