

# CAMBODIA

## Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom. Buddhism is the state religion.

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with the government and engaged with leaders of various faiths and faith-based organizations on issues of tolerance and pluralism.

## Section I. Religious Demography

An estimated 96 percent of the population is Theravada Buddhist. The vast majority of ethnic-Khmer Cambodians is Buddhist, and there is a close association between Buddhism, Khmer cultural traditions and identity, and daily life. According to the Ministry of Cults and Religion, the Mahayana school of Buddhism claims approximately 19,550 followers and has 167 temples throughout the country.

Approximately 2.4 percent of the population, predominantly ethnic Cham, is Muslim and typically live in towns and rural fishing villages on the banks of the Tonle Sap Lake and the Mekong River, as well as in Kampot Province. There are four branches of Islam represented in the country: the Malay-influenced Shafi branch, practiced by as much as 90 percent of Muslims; the Saudi-Kuwaiti-influenced Salafi (Wahhabi) branch; the indigenous Iman-San branch; and the Kadiani branch. The remaining 1.6 percent of the population is Baha'i, Jewish, ethnic Vietnamese Cao Dai, or members of various Christian denominations.

## Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

### Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion, and the government does not tolerate abuse of religious freedom, either by governmental or private actors. Buddhism is the state religion, and the government promotes Buddhist holidays, provides Buddhist training and education to monks and others in pagodas, and modestly supports an institute that performs research and publishes materials on Khmer culture and Buddhist traditions.

The law requires all religious groups, including Buddhist groups, to submit applications to the Ministry of Cults and Religions if they wish to construct places of worship and 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. There is no penalty for failing to register, and some groups have not done so.

The government makes a legal distinction between places of worship and offices of prayer. The establishment of a place of worship requires the founders own the building and the land where it is located. The facility must have a minimum capacity of 200 persons, and the permit application requires 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 for the facility; the permit application requires only 20 supporters.

The Directive on Controlling External Religions requires registration of places of worship and religious schools; in addition, it requires government approval prior to constructing new places of worship. Places of worship must be located at least two kilometers (1.24 miles) from each other and may not be used for political purposes or to house criminals or fugitives from the law. The distance requirement applies only to new construction of places of worship and not to offices of religious organizations. There have been no cases documented where the directive was used to bar a church or mosque from constructing a new facility. The directive also requires that religious groups refrain from openly criticizing other groups, although this provision is rarely tested.

The government permits Buddhist religious instruction in public schools. Other forms of religious instruction are prohibited in public schools; however, non-Buddhist religious instruction may be provided by private institutions.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Khmer New Year, Pchum Ben (Ancestors' Day), Visakha Bochea (a day honoring the Buddha's birth and death), and Meak Bochea (a day honoring the Buddha's enlightenment).

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, according to the Ministry of Cults and Religion.

Some Cham Muslims were well-integrated into society, holding prominent positions in business and the government; however, these numbers were low compared with those for other religious groups, and surveys of Cham Muslims indicated they still perceived institutional and cultural barriers to full integration in society.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with the government and engaged Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian groups, as well as leaders of several faith-based organizations, on issues of religious tolerance and pluralism. Embassy representatives communicated regularly with religious leaders and officials at the Ministry of Cults and Religion to emphasize the importance of interfaith tolerance in a democratic society. The embassy's public diplomacy efforts also focused on faith-based communities to promote pluralism through exchanges and youth programs.

The embassy continued its Muslim engagement efforts, which provided for additional channels of information on the status of tolerance and pluralism among the Muslim population. The embassy continued a scholarship program that provided English-language training for two years to Muslim students. The ambassador hosted two iftar events for the Muslim community during Ramadan, one in Kep with Muslims of Malaysian descent and another in Phnom Penh with members of the Cham ethnic group.