

LAOS 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides citizens with “the right and freedom to believe or not to believe in religion.” The government officially recognizes four religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Baha’i Faith, with Buddhism paramount. Decree 315 defines the government as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities. Religious leaders continued to state that while authorities in urban areas and in some districts had a strong understanding of laws governing religious activities, improper restrictions on religious freedom remained prevalent in rural areas. Reports continued of local authorities, especially in isolated villages, threatening to expel followers of minority religious groups, particularly Christians associated with the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC), for refusing to renounce their faith. Local sources reported that seven Christians from two households in Pasing village, Ta-Oesy District, Salavan Province, remained homeless after villagers forced them out of their homes in October 2020; one Christian – a 20-year-old male – died of health complications due to their poor living conditions. According to the LEC, in January, villagers and village authorities from Talou village, Tao Oi District, Salavan Province, forced 14 Christians from three households to vacate their homes and later destroyed the families’ homes. No new groups successfully registered with the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) during the year. The government issued Decree 315 in 2016 with the stated intent of clarifying rules for religious practice, although religious leaders continued to state Decree 315 established onerous requirements sometimes used to restrict travel for religious purposes. Christian groups continued to report problems constructing churches in some areas. Members of minority religions continued to hide their religious affiliation in order to join the ruling Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP), the government, and the military, and to avoid facing discrimination in these institutions. Central authorities said they continued to travel to provincial areas to train officials to implement Decree 315 and other laws governing religion.

According to government and religious group sources, tensions continued in rural areas among animists, Buddhists, and growing Christian communities. Religious leaders said there were reports that villagers threatened to expel Christians from their villages if they did not renounce their faith. According to local sources, villagers from Singsavanh village, Athxayphone District, Savannakhet Province, threatened to force out three Christian families from their homes in the village for refusing to renounce their faith and that due to this threat, some of the individuals reverted to Buddhism or Animism. Burial ceremonies remained a point of

contention in some areas, with reports of animists preventing the burial of Christians in public cemeteries.

U.S. embassy officials regularly raised specific religious freedom cases and issues regarding cumbersome regulations, including registration procedures, with the government and continued to encourage the use of open dialogue and conflict resolution to resolve them. During introductory meetings with the newly appointed Minister of Home Affairs and the President of the Lao Front for National Development (LFND) in July and August, the Ambassador highlighted future areas for U.S.-Laos cooperation to protect religious freedom. Embassy officials regularly met with leaders from a wide variety of religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to understand better the problems faced by members of minority religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.6 million (midyear 2021). According to the 2015 national census, 64.7 percent of the population is Buddhist, 1.7 percent is Christian, 31.4 percent report having no religion, and the remaining 2.1 percent belong to other religions. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion of the ethnic or “lowland” Lao, who constitute 53.2 percent of the overall population. According to the LFND, an organization associated with the LPRP that, along with the MOHA, is responsible for the administration of religious organizations, the remainder of the population comprises 50 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, and the 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, Baha’is, Mahayana Buddhists, Seventh-day Adventists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), and followers of Confucianism together constitute less than 3 percent of the population. According to the *Religious Freedom in the World 2021* report issued by the international Catholic Church-affiliated NGO Aid to the Church in Need, Christians comprise 2.8 percent of the population. The Catholic Church estimates its membership at 100,000, the LEC estimates its membership at more than 200,000, the Methodist Church estimates its membership at 4,700 members, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church estimates its adherents at 2,500. Muslim community leaders estimate the community has approximately 1,000

members, and the Baha'i Faith estimates its community has approximately 2,200 members.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for “the right and freedom to believe or not to believe in religion” and states citizens are equal before the law regardless of their beliefs or ethnic group. The constitution also states the government respects and protects all lawful activities of Buddhists and followers of other religions and “mobilizes and encourages Buddhist monks and novices as well as the clergy of other religions to participate in activities that are beneficial to the country and people.” It prohibits all acts that create division among religious groups and classes of persons. The government officially recognizes four religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Baha'i Faith.

Decree 315, issued in 2016 with the stated intent of clarifying rules for religious practice, upholds “respect for the religious rights and freedom” of both believers and nonbelievers. The decree’s stated purpose is to set the principles, regulations, and laws concerning the governance and protection of religious activities for clergy, teachers of religion, believers, and religious groups in order to preserve and promote national culture, increase solidarity among members of religious groups, and “preserve and develop the nation.” The decree clarifies rules for religious practice and defines the government as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities. The decree reiterates the constitutional priority that religious practice should serve national interests by promoting development and education and by instructing believers to be good citizens.

The decree requires any religious group operating in the country to register with MOHA. Groups may, but are not required to, affiliate with an officially recognized religious group. Under the decree, religious groups must present information on elected or appointed religious leaders to national, provincial, district, and village-level MOHA offices for review and certification. Religious groups operating in multiple provinces must obtain national MOHA approval; groups operating in multiple districts must obtain provincial-level approval; and groups operating in multiple villages are required to obtain district-level approval. If a group wishes to operate beyond its local congregation, it must obtain approval at the corresponding level. A religious activity occurring outside a religious group’s property requires village-authority approval. Activities in another village

require approval from district authorities, from provincial authorities for activities in another district, and from national authorities for activities in another province. Religious groups must submit annual plans of all activities, including routine events, in advance for local authorities to review and approve.

The decree states that nearly all aspects of religious practice – such as congregating, holding religious services, travel of religious officials, building houses of worship, modifying existing structures, and establishing new congregations in villages where none existed – require permission from a provincial, district-level, and/or central MOHA office. MOHA may order the cessation of any religious activity or expression of beliefs not in agreement with policies, traditional customs, laws, or regulations within its jurisdiction. It may stop any religious activity it deems threatening to national stability, peace, and social order, causing serious damage to the environment, or affecting national solidarity or unity among tribes and religions, including threats to the lives, property, health, or reputations of others. The decree requires MOHA to collect information and statistics on religious operations, cooperate with foreign countries and international organizations regarding religious activities, and report religious activities to the government.

The decree states the government may sponsor Buddhist facilities, incorporate Buddhist rituals and ceremonies in state functions, and promote Buddhism as an element of the country's cultural and spiritual identity and as the predominant religion of the country.

The decree requires Buddhist clergy to have identification cards, and clergy of other religions are required to have certificates to prove they have received legitimate religious training.

Per Decree 315, the building permit process for constructing houses of worship begins with an application to local authorities and then requires district, provincial, and ultimately central-level LFND and MOHA permission. All houses of worship must register under the law and conform to applicable regulations. Religious organizations must own 5,000 square meters (54,000 square feet, or 1.24 acres) of land to construct a place of worship. MOHA officials at all levels must approve any maintenance, restoration, or construction activities at religious facilities. Local authorities may provide opinions regarding building, care, and maintenance of religious facilities, present their findings to their respective provincial governors and city mayors for consideration, and subsequently ask MOHA to review and approve activities conducted in religious facilities.

According to the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES), although there is no Buddhist curriculum taught as religion in public schools, the government promotes the teaching of Buddhist practices in public schools as part of national culture. Cultural sessions include lessons taught in Buddhist temples. Students are required to attend prayers during these lessons. MOES states that parents may remove their children from the classes if they are dissatisfied with the program. A number of private schools affiliated with various religious groups exist throughout the country and accept students from any religious group.

Individuals entering the clergy for more than three months require approval from district and village authorities, agreement from the receiving religious establishment, and agreement from a guardian or spouse, if applicable. For a period of less than three months, the village authority as well as a guardian or spouse, if applicable, must approve. The shorter period stipulations are particularly relevant to Buddhists because every Buddhist male is expected to enter the monkhood at least once in his life, often for fewer than three months.

MOES and MOHA must approve the travel abroad of clergy and religious teachers for specialized studies. Students going abroad for any kind of study (including religious studies) generally require prior MOES approval. Domestic religious organizations that also conduct religious activities overseas must receive approval from the appropriate geographical MOHA level.

According to the law, the LFND may educate and meet with religious leaders, clergy, teachers, and members to ensure compliance with laws and regulations, reduce ethnic and religious tensions, and “contribute to the development of the nation.”

The government controls the distribution of written materials for religious audiences. Decree 315 regulates the importation and printing of religious materials and production of books, documents, icons, and symbols of various religions. The Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism and MOHA must approve religious texts or other materials before they are imported. MOHA may require religious groups to certify the imported materials are truly representative of their respective religions, to address issues of authenticity, and to ensure imported materials comport with values and practices in the country. The law prohibits the import or export of unapproved printed or electronic religious materials.

A government decree adopted in March defines principles and rules for “ethnic management.” One section of the decree provides for protection and preservation of traditional burial practices.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), with a reservation that Article 18 on freedom of religion shall not be construed as authorizing or encouraging any activities to directly or indirectly coerce or compel an individual to believe or not to believe in a religion or to change his or her religion or belief, and that all acts that create division and discrimination among ethnic groups and religious groups are incompatible with the article.

Government Practices

Religious leaders continued to say that authorities in urban areas and in some districts had a stronger understanding of laws governing religious activities, compared with authorities in rural areas, including provisions of Decree 315, and consequently improper restrictions on religious freedom remained more prevalent in rural areas. Some minority religious group leaders also stated both central and local government officials at times cited Decree 315 (or its predecessor, Decree 92) and social harmony as reasons for continuing to restrict and monitor certain religious activity, especially the activities of new or small Christian organizations whose adherents belong to minority ethnic groups. Religious leaders continued to say that many local officials were still unaware of the content of Decree 315 and how to properly apply it.

According to Radio Free Asia, on April 9, authorities released LEC Pastor Sithon Thipavong from detention in Namdoy District, Savannakhet Province, after he was held for more than one year for reportedly “disrupting unity” and “creating disorder.” The Savannakhet Provincial People’s Court convicted Sithon on April 6 on charges of holding unauthorized religious gatherings under Decree 315 for destroying community solidarity. The court sentenced him to one year in prison and levied a fine of four million kip (\$360). Authorities released him three days later on April 9 for time served; however, local sources stated that as a condition of his release, Pastor Sithon agreed not to preach again until 2022. Local officials had arrested Sithon in March 2020 for conducting religious activities in Namdoy District, Savannakhet Province, and officials detained him for more than one year, without formal charges during most of that time. In February, the NGO Voice of the Martyrs Canada reported an unknown person or persons harassed Sithon’s wife while he was still in detention and stole her motorcycle.

According to local sources, seven Christians from two households in Pasing village, Ta-Oesy District, Salavan Province remained homeless after being forced out of their homes by Pasing villagers in October 2020. The villagers had torn down the Christians' homes in 2020 after they refused to renounce their faith. The Christians continued to live on the ground underneath the ruins of their former homes as they awaited permission from local authorities to rebuild. A 20-year-old male in one of the households and the primary income earner died of health complications due to the poor living conditions. Local sources stated that local authorities and officials from MOHA had not intervened or made an effort to resolve the issue.

The LEC also reported that in January, villagers and local authorities from Talou village, Ta Oi District, Salavan Province forced 14 Christians in three households from their homes for refusing to renounce their faith. According to local sources, villagers and village authorities then tore down the families' houses and forced the Christians from the village. District authorities promised to build the Christians new homes, but as of October, construction of new houses had not started, and the individuals were living temporarily in office buildings.

Numerous Christian groups reported increased intimidation and pressure on Christians to convert to Buddhism or animism. According to the LEC, in July and August, village authorities in Nammong village, Namor District, Oudomxay Province, threatened six Christian families with expulsion from the village if they did not sign a document renouncing their faith by the end of the year. Local sources reported that four of the six families signed the form out of fear.

The leader of the Church of Jesus Christ in the country said the Church attempted to submit its application for registration in September; however, a MOHA official requested that the group first change the Church's land title into the Church's name before resubmitting the application. MOHA officials stated that no new groups registered during the year and that review of the registration applications of the Methodist Church and an unnamed Christian group that separated from the LEC continued. MOHA continued to seek information from other registered Christian groups on the differences in practices and beliefs among various Christian denominations before approving the applications, and also required applicants to submit their formal constitutions. Several religious groups stated that repeated requests by MOHA officials to first consult with other religious groups continued to significantly delay registration and other approval processes.

According to a MOHA official, the ministry continued to meet with unregistered groups to answer questions about the registration process but did so infrequently. The MOHA official reported that during the year, the ministry began to hold quarterly meetings with all registered religious groups, which religious leaders said increased their lines of communication to both express concerns and report on their groups' activities.

Although the law prohibits members of religious groups not registered with MOHA or the LFND from practicing their faith, members of several groups said they continued to do so quietly and without interference, often in house churches.

While religious groups said Decree 315 made progress on religious freedom and further clarified processes for administrative tasks, the groups also stated that some administrative requirements mandated by the decree would be burdensome and restrictive if the government were to fully implement them. Among these were requirements to submit detailed travel plans of group leaders and requests in advance to hold basic religious services.

MOHA and LFND officials continued to acknowledge that some local officials incorrectly applied regulations, created their own regulations contrary to national law, or were unaware of all the provisions in Decree 315. Several religious groups continued to recommend the government devote more resources to implementing the decree and promoting religious freedom at district and provincial levels. Central government officials said they continued their programs to disseminate and implement Decree 315 consistently nationwide in an attempt to protect minority religious groups, but they added this was particularly challenging in isolated areas.

Authorities stated that during the year, the central government, in coordination with relevant local- and provincial-level officials, continued to conduct assessments of Decree 315 implementation. Officials said they invited representatives of some, but not all, religious groups in the respective geographic areas to provide input. MOHA officials reported they planned to begin revising and converting Decree 315 into law in 2023, with the intent of submitting the draft law for National Assembly review and approval by 2025.

Some religious groups continued not to comply with the requirement to obtain advance permission to travel to other jurisdictions. One religious leader said some of the requirements in Decree 315 were so burdensome that groups often ignored them in order to carry out daily practices, including the requirements for faith

leaders to carry personal identification and to obtain advance permission for religious gatherings.

Religious leaders reported various incidents throughout the country related to the travel permission requirements. Some religious leaders stated authorities sometimes detained Christians traveling without permission to attend religious events outside their regular locales. According to the Methodist Church, in January, authorities detained a Church member for one night and fined her five million kip (\$450) for traveling to Savannakhet Province to deliver supplies without prior permission. Several minority religious group leaders also continued to report that they often traveled within the country without prior government approval because obtaining permission took too much time and officials often ultimately denied the requests. According to some religious groups, the government did not fully or uniformly enforce the decree's travel notice and approval requirement.

The government continued to enforce rules requiring programs or activities conducted outside houses of worship to receive prior approval from local or higher authorities.

According to Catholic Church officials, the government routinely surveilled members and leaders of the Church, reportedly to monitor for and protect against foreign influence. Church leaders also said the government often monitored foreigners who attended a service at the Catholic church in Vientiane.

Christian religious leaders said the government continued to strictly enforce a prohibition on proselytizing in public areas, including by foreigners. The government did not restrict proselytizing inside recognized places of worship. Both the Church of Jesus Christ and Seventh-day Adventists reported they had missionaries in the country, but the government restricted their activities to teaching English and promoting good health practices, such as hygiene and sanitation. Missionaries could not engage in religious discussions. The Church of Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church said they relied on informal person-to-person communication to attract new members.

Authorities continued to control imports of religious materials, but several groups said they could access most religious texts and documents online. MOHA officials said they coordinated with religious groups to review imported materials to ensure these were in accordance with the organization's beliefs. Due to these restrictions,

sources from the Baha'i community, and other religious groups, said they chose to produce and print their own religious documents in the country.

Several minority religious groups reported challenges with restrictions on land acquisition, and on building and renovating places of worship, although the LFND Religious Affairs Department stated it continued to emphasize that designated church structures should replace house churches whenever possible. According to religious leaders, local authorities in many areas considered group worship in homes illegal and told villagers they needed permits to worship at home. The Seventh-day Adventist Church attributed the large number of house churches to difficulties in obtaining enough land to meet Decree 315 requirements.

Religious groups reported challenges with obtaining the proper land titles for parcels of land for places of worship. MOHA officials required groups to place land titles in the name of the religious group rather than in the name of a member or religious leader. Religious groups, however, reported experiencing lengthy delays when seeking to change their titles with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment's Department of Land.

Many religious leaders also said they continued to experience lengthy delays in obtaining permits for church construction and generally received no response to requests. A Catholic Church official said the Church had been awaiting approval for years to build a new church in Hinherb District, Vientiane Province, which was ultimately denied. According to the Catholic Church representative, the Church had been waiting since 2007 to receive approval to renovate a different church building in Kaoyod village, Chanthabouly District, Vientiane Capital. During this time, government officials seized a building on the same property previously used for training and education programs. Starting in 2020, a Chinese construction firm occupied the building while constructing a Chinese government-funded school on the adjacent lot. According to Church officials, the government intended to use the building as a dormitory for Chinese construction workers, but Church officials feared such use would damage the building. From March until June, the Church engaged in 12 rounds of negotiations to ensure that the building would be used as office space instead of living quarters. The government gave Church officials a letter promising the return of the building upon completion of construction but without a set date. The Church representative also said guidelines for the construction of religious buildings delineated in Decree 315 were unclear.

Some sources said the legal requirement that a religious organization own 5,000 square meters (54,000 square feet or 1.24 acres) of land to build a church or temple

limited the ability of some smaller congregations, which lacked sufficient resources, to obtain a space of that size. Seventh-day Adventist Church leaders stated they continued to struggle to purchase enough land in urban areas, where most Seventh-day Adventists live, to meet the land requirement. They said the largest Seventh-day Adventist Church, located in Vientiane, sits on less than 3,300 square meters (35,000 square feet).

According to Buddhist organizations, prominent Buddhists continued to work with the government to draft legislation to ensure laws reflected the role of Buddhism in Lao culture.

Christian students continued to say they were uncomfortable with the requirement that they attend prayers in Buddhist temples during cultural classes taught there as part of the public school curriculum. In some rural areas, lessons in Buddhism remained mandatory to pass to the next grade level, despite not being a MOES requirement. This was especially true in areas where temples provided education because the government was unable to support a public school. Buddhist leaders continued to report that Buddhist education was not compulsory in public school, and students were free not to participate.

Leaders of the Catholic Church and Seventh-day Adventist Church said Christian officials needed to hide their religion in order to join the LPRP, government, or military and to avoid facing discrimination in these institutions. Some non-Buddhists identified as Buddhist in their family book (a household registration document). Seventh-day Adventist officials continued to say there was a “hidden law” mandating a citizen could not be both a Christian and a member of the LPRP. Members of other minority religious groups said it was hard for their members to join the government, advance to higher-level positions, or become village chiefs.

LFND and MOHA officials stated they continued to visit those areas where a greater number of religious freedom abuses had reportedly taken place to instruct local authorities on government policy and law, including Decree 315. The officials stated they frequently traveled beyond the capital to encourage religious groups to practice in accordance with the country’s laws and regulations. They also hosted training workshops for local officials to explain their obligations under the constitution and the right of all citizens to believe or not to believe. During these sessions, central authorities provided training to provincial LFND and MOHA officials on Decree 315 and other laws governing religion and held workshops with local authorities and religious leaders that reviewed the basic tenets of Buddhism, Christianity, the Baha’i Faith, and Islam. Due to funding and

capacity constraints, as well as strict COVID-19 lockdown and prevention measures, MOHA, with support from the NGO Institute for International Engagement (IGE), held religious freedom workshops in only two of 18 provinces during the year, compared with four in 2020 and 18 in 2019. Religious leaders stated that while religious groups faced limits on religious freedom in both urban and rural areas, concerns over constraints on religious freedom were more prevalent in rural areas.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to religious leaders, most disputes among religious communities occurred in villages and rural areas where the central government's ability to enforce national laws was limited.

LEC leaders continued to say that growth in Church membership exacerbated tensions within some communities, particularly among villagers who were wary of minority religions. According to one official, majority non-Christian neighbors often harassed new Christian members in these villages for abandoning their traditions, typically Buddhist or animist.

Religious leaders said that in some rural areas, there continued to be reports that villagers threatened to expel Christians from their villages if they did not renounce their faith.

According to local sources, villagers from Singsavang village, Athxayphone District, Savannakhet Province, threatened to force three Christian families from their homes in the village for refusing to renounce their faith, and due to these threats, some of the individuals reverted to Buddhism or animism.

In many villages, religious disputes continued to be referred to government-sanctioned village mediation units comprised of private citizens. According to Christian group leaders, these units often encouraged Christians to compromise their beliefs by accommodating local Buddhist or animist community practices. In dealing with local disputes regarding religious issues, MOHA and LFND officials said they first waited for local authorities to resolve an issue before getting involved. MOHA and LFND officials continued to state their ministries did not have the resources to respond to every conflict.

According to Christian religious leaders, burial practices remained a contentious issue. In some rural areas, Christians said they were not allowed to use public

cemeteries, were not given land for separate cemeteries, and had to resort to burying the remains on farms or in backyards. According to the LEC, Christians in Salakay Bang village buried three Christians in rice fields after they were unable to access public cemeteries in Phin District, Savannakhet Province. A Christian leader said some churches continued to consider purchasing land for cemeteries so members would not have to use public cemeteries, and some Christian churches discussed purchasing land together to designate as Christian cemeteries.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials continued to regularly advocate for religious freedom with a range of government officials, including those central- and local-level officials responsible for implementing Decree 315, to ensure compliance of the government's activities with the country's obligations under the ICCPR and other international instruments to which it was a signatory. In meetings with the newly appointed Minister of Home Affairs and President of the LFND in July and August, the Ambassador highlighted future areas for U.S.-Laos cooperation on protecting religious freedom.

Embassy officers raised concerns with government officials regarding cumbersome procedures, including registration, obtaining advance permission to hold religious services and travel for religious purposes, as well as the government's efforts to implement Decree 315 at the provincial and local levels.

Embassy officials regularly met with representatives from different religious and advocacy groups, including the LEC, Seventh-day Adventists, the Church of Jesus Christ, the Methodist Church, the Catholic Church, the Islamic Association of Laos, the Baha'i Faith community, the Buddhist community, and IGE to address religious equality concerns, such as registration, Decree 315 administrative requirements, land acquisition, and tensions with local Buddhist and animist communities.

The embassy continued to amplify messages promoting religious freedom on its Facebook page, which had more than 350,000 followers. In January, the embassy recognized National Religious Freedom Day through social media postings, and in November, the embassy highlighted the work of the U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation to preserve palm leaf manuscripts of the ancient Tham script.