

# CAMBODIA 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution states Buddhism is the state religion. The law provides for freedom of belief and religious worship, provided such freedom neither interferes with others' beliefs and religions nor violates public order and security. The law does not allow non-Buddhist denominations to proselytize publicly. A government directive restricts monks from participating in political protests and requires them to be politically neutral.

On December 22, authorities sentenced former Buddhist monk Voeung Samnang to five years in prison for conspiracy to commit treason and incitement to commit a felony or cause social unrest for posting messages critical of Prime Minister Hun Sen to social media. As of year's end, the Ministry of Cults and Religions (MCR) had not publicly released a draft law reportedly criminalizing "religious people" who participate in political acts, including "organized activity against any political party." In February, the Prime Minister announced a campaign to appoint more Muslims to leadership roles in local governments serving significant Muslim populations, leading to the appointment of 12 deputy provincial governors and 32 deputy district chiefs across the country. Slow government registration of communal land grants hindered the ability of some Indigenous communities to protect forest land they considered sacred. The government continued to deny refugee status to 12 Christian Montagnards from Vietnam, despite an outstanding request from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In July and August, the leader of a doomsday cult called thousands of followers, including some from abroad, to his farm in Siem Reap to await a cataclysmic flood. This prompted authorities to issue an order for the crowd of 15,000 to 20,000 individuals to disperse. The government, however, did not use force against the leader or his followers to end the gathering.

Indigenous community leaders continued to say individuals and companies used deceptive practices to acquire sacred forest that they then cleared for commercial use, and other companies continued illegally clearing sacred forests to profit from logging or to convert the land to commercial purposes.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials met with government officials to promote religious freedom and the importance of fully integrating religious minorities into society, and to highlight the benefits of respecting the country's religious pluralism. During the year, the Ambassador visited religious sites and met with Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim leaders, as well as members of the ethnic Cham minority on provincial outreach trips. The embassy conducted outreach to minority religious groups – including Muslims, Indigenous peoples practicing animist religions, and the country's Christian community – to obtain first-hand views on the government's and society's tolerance of and support for these groups' religious practices. The embassy implemented a strategy to increase recruitment from religious minority communities and other underrepresented groups for locally employed staff positions and embassy programs. The Ambassador used his social media platforms to promote tolerance for different religious practices in the country. Some embassy programs focused on the preservation of religious cultural sites.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 16.7 million (midyear 2022). According to the MCR, approximately 93 percent of the population is Buddhist, 95 percent of whom practice Theravada Buddhism, while a smaller number practice Thammayut Buddhism. The remaining 7 percent of the population includes Christians, Muslims, animists, Baha'is, Jews, and Cao Dai adherents. Most ethnic Vietnamese traditionally practice Mahayana Buddhism, while others are Theravada Buddhists or Roman Catholics. Boston University's 2020 World Religion Database estimates 85.4 percent of the population is Buddhist, 4.3 percent ethnic religionist, 2.8 percent Christian, 2.4 percent Chinese folk-religionist, 3 percent atheist or agnostic, and 1.9 percent Muslim.

Most Catholics in the country are ethnic Vietnamese and constitute 0.4 percent of the population. Nongovernmental organization (NGO) estimates of the number of Protestants, including evangelical Christians, vary but they state these groups represent less than 2 percent of the total population.

According to the most recent government and NGO estimates, between 2 and 5 percent of the population is Muslim and predominantly ethnic Cham, although not all Cham are Muslim. The Cham typically live in towns and rural fishing villages along the banks of Tonle Sap Lake and the Mekong River, as well as in Kampot Province. Nearly 90 percent of Muslims are adherents of Sunni Islam, subscribing to the Shafi'i school of Islamic law. The remaining minority follow Salafist, Wahhabist Sunni doctrines; there are also Ahmadi Muslims. A portion of the Cham community also subscribes to the Indigenous Iman-San sect of Islam, combining traditional ancestral practices with Sunni Islam.

According to government estimates, 0.28 percent of the population is ethnic Bunong, the majority of whom follow animistic religious practices. An additional estimated 0.25 percent of the population includes Baha'is, Jews, and Cao Dai adherents.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for freedom of belief and religious worship, as long as such freedom neither interferes with others' beliefs and religions nor violates public order and security. The constitution establishes Buddhism as the state religion and provides for government support of Buddhist education. It also prohibits discrimination based on religion.

The law requires that religious groups refrain from openly criticizing other religious groups, but it does not elaborate the legal consequences for these types of violations. The law also forbids religious organizations from organizing events,

rallies, meetings, and training sessions that are politically focused. A 2021 government directive restricts monks from participating in political protests and requires they be politically neutral.

The law requires all religious groups, including Buddhist groups, to register with the MCR. The law mandates that religious organizations inform the government of their goals; describe activities; provide biographical information for all religious leaders; note funding sources; submit annual reports detailing all activities; and refrain from insulting other religious groups, fomenting disputes, or undermining national security. Registration requires approval from numerous local, provincial, and national government offices, a process that can take up to 90 days. There are no penalties for failing to register, but unregistered religious groups cannot receive an income tax exemption from the Ministry of Economy and Finance.

The law bans non-Buddhist groups from proselytizing publicly and stipulates that non-Buddhist literature may be distributed only inside religious institutions. The law also prohibits offers of money or materials to convince persons to convert. It prohibits and penalizes acts that constitute “infringement on state religion,” including unauthorized wearing of Buddhist monks’ robes in public, damaging Buddhist religious premises or sacred objects, and “insulting” a Buddhist monk or a nun.

The law does not provide authorization for a religious entity to own land, which compels religious leaders to register land in their personal capacity rather than that of their organization. The law requires separate registration of all places of worship and religious schools. Authorities may temporarily shut down unregistered places of worship and religious schools until they are registered. The law also makes a legal distinction between “places of worship” and “offices of prayer.” The establishment of a place of worship requires that an individual, not a religious organization, own both the structure 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. An office of prayer may be located in a rented property and has no minimum capacity requirement.

The permit application for an office of prayer requires the support of at least 25 congregants. 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 offices of prayer.

Schools that focus on religious studies must be registered with the MCR and the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MOEYS). MOEYS advises religious schools to follow the ministry's core curriculum, which does not include a religious component. Non-Buddhist religious schools are permitted and may be either public or private. Secular public schools may choose to have supplemental Buddhist lessons, but they are required to coordinate with MOEYS when doing so. Not all secular public schools offer supplemental Buddhist lessons, and non-Buddhist students may opt out of such instruction. The law forbids non-Buddhist supplemental religious instruction in secular public schools.

There is no visa category specifically applicable to religious workers.

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

### **Government Practices**

According to several human rights NGOs and in accordance with government policies, the ruling Cambodian People's Party, though the MCR, continued to exercise control over appointments to leadership positions in the country's primary Buddhist and Muslim organizations. The Prime Minister and the King approved senior Buddhist and Muslim leadership positions.

According to Radio Free Asia, on December 22, authorities sentenced former Buddhist monk Voeung Samnang to five years in prison for conspiracy to commit treason and incitement to commit a felony or cause social unrest. Voeung, whom Thai authorities in November 2021 reportedly defrocked, arrested, and deported

at the request of an aide to the Prime Minister, had pleaded not guilty to the charges. Authorities accused Voeung of posting political messages on Facebook critical of the Prime Minister and, in addition to the prison term, prohibited any future reinstatement to the Buddhist monkhood. Observers assessed that Voeung was banned from the monkhood for political reasons and that the incident was not an example of religious discrimination.

As of year's end, the MCR had not released to the public a draft law, prepared in 2021, criminalizing "religious people" who participated in political acts, including "organized activity against any political party." The MCR reportedly consulted with religious leaders of several faiths when preparing the draft. Experts who reviewed the draft legislation at the time said the term "religious people" was commonly used to refer to monks and was not further defined in the draft law, making it unclear if the proposed rule would apply to non-Buddhists. According to these sources, criminal penalties could include up to 15 years in prison.

Senior leaders conducted regular outreach to religious minority communities and promoted their activities in local press. For example, while hosting an interfaith forum in September for thousands of local religious leaders, the Prime Minister declared October 20 to be a national day of religious cooperation to combat human trafficking.

The government's Department of Halal Affairs, under the Ministry of Commerce's General Department of Consumer Protection, Competition, and Fraud Prevention, oversees the production and proper labeling of halal products made in the country. The department reported that from 2017 to 2022, 123 companies earned certificates of compliance with halal standards for 823 products.

The government continued to require all public hospitals to have Islamic prayer halls and to uphold the right of women to wear Muslim headscarves at public schools. In March, the Ministry of Tourism encouraged gas stations to set up prayer rooms for Muslim customers.

In February, Prime Minister Hun Sen announced a campaign to appoint more Muslims to leadership roles in local governments serving significant Muslim populations. The national government subsequently appointed 12 Muslim deputy provincial governors and 32 Muslim deputy district chiefs in provinces and districts across the country, according to the MCR.

The Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts stated it continued efforts to register land for Indigenous communities who consider the forest sacred. Local residents, however, said the government was slow to issue land titles, damaging their livelihoods and negatively affecting their ability to protect sacred forests from government-sanctioned and illegal logging or industrial agriculture. In August, the NGO Cambodian Center for Human Rights reported that in the past 11 years, the government registered only 37 community land titles throughout the country. According to the NGO, only 8.1 percent of all Indigenous communities in the country were able to legally protect their land through a community land title.

The government continued to reject a UNHCR request to accept for permanent residency 12 Christian Montagnards from Vietnam who came to the country to claim refugee status in 2017. The government required the 12 individuals, part of an original group of 200, to live together in a single housing complex in Phnom Penh. Authorities prohibited the adults from working and did not allow the children to attend school. Although UNHCR provided some support, the Ministry of Interior did not recognize the refugee status of the Montagnards and reportedly had instructed them to leave the country in 2021. As of year's end, all 12 individuals remained in the country.

The government continued to promote Buddhist holidays by grants of official status. The government also provided Buddhist training and education to monks and laypersons in pagodas and gave financial support to the Buddhist Institute, an entity under the MCR that conducts research and publishes materials on Khmer culture and Buddhist traditions. The government did not grant similar treatment to other religious groups.

Local religious leaders in Battambang Province reported the government provided equal opportunities for religious minorities, including Muslim and Baha'i adherents in the province.

Catholic media reported that in March, the government awarded the Grand Order of National Merit to Bishop Olivier Schmitthaeusler, head of the Apostolic Vicariate of Phnom Penh, in recognition of his faith-based contributions in Takeo Province to health care, social work, community services, education, arts, and culture. In May, the MCR presented Bishop Schmitthaeusler with a certificate in the name of the government-appointed Supreme Patriarch of Mohanikaya Buddhism, Non Nget, honoring the bishop for his contributions to the nation and acknowledging him as a symbol of unity between Christianity and Buddhism.

According to media reports, in July, Khem Veasna, president of the League for Democracy Party, began broadcasting apocalyptic messages on Facebook. Veasna claimed status as a "divine preacher" and called on his followers, including migrant workers in South Korea and Thailand, to gather at his farmhouse in Siem Reap as the only place that would be safe from the cataclysmic floods he said would come on August 31. The Cambodian embassy in Seoul issued a statement advising workers not to travel to Veasna's farm. On August 25, labor ministry spokesperson Heng Sour told Cambodian workers in South Korea to resist what he called "one individual's superstition." An estimated 15,000 to 20,000 individuals, including families, went to the farm site. In response to stated concerns about safety issues and food insecurity at the crowded site, the government erected barricades prohibiting further entry and ordered the crowd to disperse, although authorities did not use force to carry out the order. The order resulted in the crowd shrinking to under 1,000 by August 31. Prime Minister Hun Sen called Veasna's messaging a political stunt. Progovernment media asserted that Veasna raised hundreds of millions of dollars from his followers. As of the end of the year, the government had not pursued any legal action against Veasna.



There were no reports the government enforced the restriction against non-Buddhist denominations engaging in proselytizing.

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

Indigenous community leaders continued to report that individuals and companies who purchased sacred Indigenous land commonly hid their intention to clear the land of forest cover, a fact that, if known, would have caused local residents and religious leaders to object to the sale of the land. Sources stated it was difficult for local communities to prevent the clearing of forest after a sale was completed and payments made. During the year, non-Indigenous investors reportedly also illegally cleared forests protected for spiritual practices. One Indigenous group reported that at least 143 illegal structures that were constructed to house cashew farm workers remained within the community's protected forest.

Observers and religious leaders continued to report improved public acceptance of persons practicing non-Buddhist religions, although some biases and prejudice remained. Leaders in the minority Muslim Cham community stated that Cham continued to have equal employment and educational opportunities.

The *Union of Catholic Asian News* reported that in June, hundreds of Cambodian Catholics publicly celebrated Bishop Schmitthaeusler's ordination of John Baptist Bun Prak Hong as the first Catholic priest from the Indigenous Phnong community in the Apostolic Prefecture of Kampong Cham's Mondulkiri Province.

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

The U.S. Ambassador raised the issue of the 12 Christian Montagnards from Vietnam on several occasions with government ministers and other representatives and encouraged the government to allow their permanent resettlement in the country. Embassy officials regularly raised with government representatives the importance of fully integrating religious minorities into

society and highlighted the benefits of respecting the country's religious pluralism. The Ambassador called for tolerance for differing religious faiths and encouraged the government to continue protecting the rights of every person to practice his or her faith without interference.

Embassy officers underscored with leaders of Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim groups the importance of accepting religious diversity, emphasizing the importance of interfaith tolerance in a democratic society. Embassy officers met with ethnic Cham and other Muslim community members, Indigenous leaders, and representatives of the country's small Christian community to understand their perspectives on religious tolerance, respect for minority culture, equal economic opportunity, and integration of ethnic minorities into the wider culture, and to express the embassy's support for religious freedom. In support of Indigenous faith practices, in April, the Ambassador traveled to Kampong Thom Province and met with leaders of the Indigenous Kuy community to discuss protecting sacred forests and new U.S. Agency for International Development's carbon credit programs that help safeguard forests important to the spiritual practices of the Indigenous Bunong community. In July, the Ambassador visited Phnom Yat in Pailin Province, a Buddhist place of worship featuring a pagoda built at the end of the 19th century by the Kola, a local ethnic minority group. In Battambang Province, the Ambassador visited with young Muslim leaders at Dhiya-Ud-Din Mosque, which serves 741 Muslim families, and discussed their freedom in exercising their religious belief and how they participated in educating their villagers.

Local religious leaders expressed appreciation for U.S. vaccine donations, many of which were provided to Battambang's Muslim community. In order to document religious persecution by the Khmer Rouge regime, the embassy also continued to fund transitional justice programs that engaged the Cham Muslim community.

The Ambassador, through his social media platforms, advocated tolerance for different religious practices in the country, recognized the celebrations of Easter, Passover, and Ramadan, highlighted a visit to an ancient religious site in Preah

Vihear Province, promoted respect for the free exercise of religion on International Religious Freedom Day, and featured his visit to a rural mosque in Battambang Province. The embassy implemented a strategy to increase recruitment from religious minority communities and other underrepresented groups for locally employed staff positions and for embassy programs, promoting vacancy announcements to members of those communities and soliciting increased minority applications to open positions. The embassy also continued to support the preservation of significant religious cultural sites, including a July announcement awarding \$360,800 in funding to support the restoration of an 11th century temple in Preah Vihear Province.