



LAOS

Key Findings

Serious religious freedom abuses continue, particularly in ethnic minority areas, and restrictive laws remain in place. The Lao government seems either unable or unwilling to fully curtail religious freedom abuses in provincial areas, where officials and police are suspicious of Protestant growth. Over the past five years, however, religious freedom conditions have improved for the majority Buddhist groups and for other religious groups living in urban areas. In addition, the government agency tasked with monitoring religious activity and carrying out government religious policy has engaged with religious groups and with international NGOs to better understand religious freedom and occasionally has intervened in cases of detention or property confiscation. Nevertheless, based on ongoing concerns, in 2014 USCIRF again places Laos on Tier 2, where it has been since 2009.

Background

The Lao government's toleration of religious activity continues to vary by region, ethnicity, and religious group. Buddhism, which is deeply embedded in Lao culture and state functions and is practiced by the majority of the population, is now generally free from restrictive oversight. Lao Catholics have been allowed to build churches and, in the past several years, to ordain priests and the first new bishop since 1975. Lao Protestants in urban areas also have reported an increased ability to worship and to re-open, build, and expand some religious venues. The small Baha'i community also reports better working relations with government officials and an expansion of its facilities. Animism is practiced by most rural ethnic minority groups and, while not officially recognized, is often tolerated by provincial officials. Still, there are reports that the government discourages some animist practice viewed as dangerous or "superstitious" and

actively promotes Buddhism as an alternative to traditional beliefs.

The Lao Constitution provides for freedom of religion, but the Prime Minister's 2002 Decree on Religious Practice (Decree 92) contains language allowing government control of, and interference in, religious activities. Religious leaders have reported that legally-permitted religious activities, such as proselytizing and producing religious materials, are restricted in practice. The Decree also includes cumbersome approval requirements for any religious activity. Some

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religious groups are unable to legally register under the Decree and have faced serious problems in the past. The Decree also contains vague prohibitions on activities that create "social division" or "chaos" and reiterates parts of the Lao criminal code arbitrarily used in the past to arrest and detain dissidents. Provincial officials routinely cite the social and familial divisions caused by the spread of Protestantism as justification for serious religious freedom abuses.

Religious Freedom Conditions 2013–2014

During the reporting period, provincial officials violated the freedom of religion or belief of ethnic minority Protestants through detentions, surveillance, harassment, property confiscations, forced relocations, and forced renunciations of faith—though there were fewer reports of these abuses this year than last. Local officials in Phin

and Atsaphagthong districts, Savannakhet province, attempted to force Protestants to renounce their faith by requiring them to partake in animist ceremonies. In Borikan district, Borikhamsai province, ethnic minority converts to Christianity were ordered to recant their faith or lose their property. In Sanamsai district, Attapeu prov-

entities in provinces with the most egregious religious freedom problems;

- Initiate human rights and religious tolerance training as part of U.S.-Laos security sector reform programs, ensure that any officers participating in such programs are thoroughly vetted to confirm that

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ince, officials forcibly relocated a couple for converting to Christianity.

Also in the past year, Lao authorities released Khamson Baccam, a Protestant leader who was arrested in 2007 for religious reasons, and Protestant pastors Yohan and Vanna, arrested in January 2011 in for holding Christmas celebrations. Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) authorities also reportedly held a series of meetings with registered religious groups seeking input for possible revisions to Decree 92.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

The United States has repeatedly expressed concerns about the disappearance of human rights defender Sombath Somphon, raising the public profile of human rights in U.S.-Lao relations which is primarily based on small economic assistance programs in public health, development, and counter-narcotics programs. There is a small religious freedom training program for Lao officials, run through an NGO. In addition, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Initiate a formal human rights mechanism to address regularly with the government of Laos such issues as ethnic and religious discrimination, torture and other forms of ill-treatment in prisons, unlawful arrests and detentions, and the lack of due process and an independent judiciary;
- With due regard to the need to address basic human needs and humanitarian concerns, consider voting against new multilateral development bank loans that would benefit the governments or state-owned

they have not been implicated in any human rights abuses, and deny U.S. training, visas, or assistance to any unit or personnel found to have engaged in a consistent pattern of violations of human rights, including religious freedom;

- Ensure that technical assistance programs support the goals of protecting religious freedom, human rights defenders, and ethnic minorities, including: rule of law programs and legal exchanges that focus on revising Decree 92; training in human rights, the rule of law, and religious freedom for Laotian police, religious leaders, and academics; and capacity-building for Lao civil society groups carrying out charitable, medical, and development activities in accordance with the Lao government's new law on non-governmental organizations; and
- Encourage the Broadcasting Board of Governors to provide adequate funding for the Voice of America and Radio Free Asia Lao language broadcasts and increase efforts to provide uncensored Internet, and other information, into Laos.