

KEY FINDINGS

Restrictions on freedom of religion or belief in Laos are among the many human rights abuses occurring in the country, including government-directed or tolerated enforced disappearances and constraints on freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of assembly and association, and freedom of the press. Throughout 2017, some religious groups were able to practice their faith freely, while others continued to experience abuses from local-level state and nonstate actors. For example, in some parts of Laos, state and nonstate actors continued to threaten, harass, attack, or arrest Christians because of their faith. The

Lao government manages religion through Decree 315, but in 2017—a year after the decree was first introduced—little information was available about its effect on religious groups, such as their ability to register, conduct activities, and recruit and train clergy. In 2018, USCIRF again places Laos on its Tier 2, where it has been since 2009, for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the “systematic, ongoing, egregious” standard for designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Raise concerns about violations of freedom of religion or belief with the Lao government during the annual Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue, including issues of discrimination, harassment, and violence against religious and ethnic minorities; torture and other forms of ill treatment in prisons; unlawful arrests and detentions; and the lack of due process and an independent judiciary;
- Work with the Lao government to ensure the implementation of Decree 315 is consistent with international human rights standards, and encourage accountability for central, provincial, and local government officials and law enforcement acting in contravention to Laos’ laws, the Lao constitution, and international standards;
- Engage the Lao government on specific cases of religious freedom violations, including but not limited to forced evictions and/or forced renunciations of faith, and emphasize the importance of consistent implementation, enforcement, and interpretation of the rule of law by officials at all levels of government and law enforcement authorities;
- Support technical assistance programs that reinforce the goals of protecting religious freedom, human rights defenders, and ethnic minorities, including: rule of law programs and legal exchanges that focus on implementing Decree 315 consistent with international human rights standards; training for Lao police and security forces, provincial and local officials, and lawyers and judges in human rights, the rule of law, and religious freedom and tolerance; and capacity building for Lao civil society groups carrying out charitable, medical, and developmental activities;
- Ensure that Lao police and security officials participating in training or technical assistance programs are thoroughly vetted pursuant to the Leahy Amendment to confirm that they are not implicated in human rights abuses, and deny U.S. visas, assistance, or training to any unit or personnel found to have engaged in a consistent pattern of violations of human rights, including religious freedom;
- Continue to inquire consistently into the whereabouts of Sombath Somphone, especially given that the Lao government’s inability to provide any information from its investigation into his disappearance is emblematic of its overall approach to human rights, civil society, and individual rights; and
- Apply the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, Executive Order 13818, or other relevant targeted tools, to deny U.S. visas to and block the U.S. assets of specific officials and agencies identified as responsible for violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Lao People's Democratic Republic

GOVERNMENT

Communist State

POPULATION

7,127,000

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, the Baha'i faith

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

64.7% Buddhist

1.7% Christian

31.4% No religion

2.1% Other/not stated

*Estimates compiled from the CIA World Factbook

BACKGROUND

In some parts of the country, religious freedom conditions are generally good, especially for the majority Buddhist community. Even some unregistered religious groups operate freely in certain areas if local officials tolerate their activities and choose not to impose restrictions on the practice of their faith. However, in some parts of the country, local officials inconsistently interpret and implement religious regulations to the detriment of religious and ethnic minorities. Some local officials also tend to be highly suspicious of Christians.

Violations of freedom of religion or belief in Laos occur in the context of overall constraints on human rights.

The Lao government tightly manages religious groups much in the same way it controls any individual or group it perceives could deviate from the state's agenda or who expresses dissent or criticism. For example, in April 2017, a court sentenced

three Lao individuals to lengthy prison terms for criticizing the government, in particular its human rights abuses. The three individuals—Lodkham Thammavong, Soukane Chaithad, and Somphone Phimmasone—were

working in Thailand when they posted the criticism online and were arrested in March 2016 upon returning to Laos to obtain travel documents and permits. They were sentenced to 12, 18, and 20 years in prison, respectively. In August 2017, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention identified their detention as arbitrary, calling for their immediate release and an investigation.

December 2017 marked five years since the disappearance of Lao civil society leader Sombath Somphone. Although Sombath's wife, Ng Shui Meng, continues to seek information from officials about his disappearance, by the end of the reporting period the government had not provided updated reports

of its investigation.

In recent years, civil society organizations in Laos—known as non-profit associations—have reported increased government restrictions, including more frequent harassment and arrests.

In November 2017, the Lao government put into effect a new Decree on Associations that further limits organizations' rights and grants the government even greater latitude to interfere in their operations and activities.

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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2017

Legal Framework and Restrictions on Religious Practice and Activities

The Lao government manages religious affairs through two main bodies: the Ministry of Home Affairs, which has authority to grant permission for activities or to establish new houses of worship, and the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), a mass organization of political and social entities, which disseminates and explains the government's policies on religion among local-level officials and works with religious organizations. The ambiguous relationship and roles of the ministry and LFNC, particularly at the local level, create confusion and sometimes bureaucratic obstacles that limit religious groups' ability to practice their faith.

Religion is regulated and managed through the constitution and decrees, most recently Decree 315, which was issued by the prime minister in August 2016. Like its predecessor—Decree 92—Decree 315 provides local officials and the LFNC wide latitude to interpret the relative freedom and restrictions within which individuals and religious organizations can practice their faith, which in part explains why the treatment of religious followers varies widely across and within provinces. The decree outlines the multilayered approvals required for any construction-related work at houses of worship; for operating or conducting religious activities in more than one village, district, or province; and for religious clergy. Also, Decree 315 requires government approval in advance to publish or import religious materials.

Abuses against Minorities

In 2017, it remained challenging to obtain and verify information about violations of religious freedom in Laos, in part because the government owns and controls nearly all media outlets. As in previous years, religious followers and ethnic minorities at times modified their words and actions to avoid detection; self-censorship similarly applies to domestic civil society organizations. Notwithstanding limited reports, in 2017, government and societal actors continued to

discriminate against and abuse religious and ethnic minorities. In general, the government is particularly suspicious of some ethnicities, like the Hmong, and targets Christian individuals and groups, although ill treatment is worse in some provinces—like Savannakhet, where local authorities restrict religious practice—than others.

In addition to the four recognized religious groups, the government recognizes three Christian groups—the

Lao Evangelical Church, the Catholic Church, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church—and pressures religious organizations and other denominations not part of these three groups to join a recognized church. Christians

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opting not to join one of the recognized groups or who experience difficulties obtaining government permissions sometimes operate house churches, which are illegal. Local authorities in some areas allow unregistered house churches to operate quietly, whereas others harass and detain or arrest Christians who practice in house churches.

During 2017, USCIRF received reports that Christians in some parts of Laos were threatened, harassed, attacked, or arrested because of their faith. In the past, Christians have been expelled from their homes and villages under pressure from both authorities and neighbors. Authorities reportedly monitor churches, and Christians continue to report being pressured to renounce their faith. In December 2017, Christians reported that some local authorities enforced restrictive policies—for example, prohibiting certain movements to attend religious and cultural activities outside one's own village—that interfered with their ability to celebrate Christmas. Also, the government continued to promote Buddhism through the state apparatus, for example in public schools. In the past, LFNC or government officials in some areas have directed the content of sermons and confiscated religious materials.

Religious freedom violations do not occur in all parts of the country. Religious communities tend to have more space to practice in areas where local

officials are open to having good relations. In these instances, some religious groups are allowed to conduct charitable work, and they coordinate to attend each other's religious ceremonies and celebrations.

Relations with the Vatican

In May 2017, Pope Francis named Bishop Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhanekhoun as Laos' first cardinal. Ling, an ethnic Khmu, served as apostolic vicar of Pakse, the capital of Champasak Province, before his elevation to the cardinalate in June 2017. During the 1980s, the Lao government accused then Father Ling of "making propaganda for Jesus" and imprisoned him for three years for spreading the Gospel.

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U.S. POLICY

The relationship between the United States and Laos is currently at the level of a Comprehensive Partnership, with the two governments working jointly to advance economic development and global health security, strengthen people-to-people ties, and clear unexploded ordnance.

In January 2017, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Southeast Asia W. Patrick Murphy visited Laos and spoke to government officials about these areas of cooperation. In May 2017, Lao Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith visited Washington, DC, to meet with then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and fellow foreign ministers from the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). (For more information about the United States' relationship with ASEAN relative to freedom of religion or belief in the region, refer to USCIRF's September 2017 report, *A Right for All: Freedom of Religion or Belief in ASEAN*.)

When the U.S. State Department released its 2017 Trafficking in Persons Report in June, it maintained Laos' ranking at the Tier 2 Watch List level, although it had to grant a waiver to prevent Laos from being downgraded to Tier 3, a worse ranking. The report noted the Lao government's efforts to eliminate trafficking and recommended collaboration with civil society, a challenging endeavor given the generally constricted environment for nonprofit associations in the country.

In July 2017, the U.S. government hosted Lao officials in Washington, DC, for the eighth annual Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue. According to a State Department media note, the two governments "reviewed wide-ranging development cooperation in health, nutrition, and education and discussed freedom of expression, religious freedom, and labor rights, emphasizing the important

role of civil society and rule of law to good governance, shared prosperity, and stability in the region."

In proclaiming September 15, 2017, as National Prisoner of War/Missing in Action (POW/MIA) Recognition Day, President

Donald Trump acknowledged the Lao government's assistance with the United States' investigation and recovery operations to locate missing service personnel in Southeast Asia.