

LAOS

Laos restricts religious practice using its legal code and tolerates religious freedom abuses in some rural areas. Provincial officials violate the religious freedom of ethnic minority Protestants through detentions, surveillance, harassment, property confiscations, forced relocations, and forced renunciations of faith. However, religious freedom conditions have improved for the majority Buddhist groups and for Christians, Muslims, and Baha'i's living in urban areas. Based on these concerns, USCIRF maintains Laos on its Watch List in 2012.

Background

The Lao government's toleration of religious activity varies by region, ethnicity, and religious group. Buddhism, which is deeply embedded in Lao culture and is practiced by the vast majority of the population, now generally is free from restrictions and oversight. Lao Catholics are allowed to build churches and, recently, to ordain priests and the first new bishop since 1975. Lao Protestants in urban areas report an increased ability to worship and to re-open and build facilities. The small Baha'i community reports better relations with government officials and has been allowed to expand its facility. Officials with the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), the government agency that monitors religious activity and implements religion policy, visited the Baha'i world headquarters in Israel last year.

The government officially recognizes four religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Baha'i faith. Recognized Christian groups include the Catholic Church, the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC), and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. Laos requires all Protestant groups to be part of either the LEC or the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, allegedly to prevent "disharmony." Officials deny other Protestant denominations recognition, making their activities illegal and subject to harassment, detention, or other serious abuses.

The Lao Constitution provides for freedom of religion, but the 2002 Decree on Religious Practice (Decree 92) allows government control of, and interference in, religious activities. In practice, legally permitted religious activities, such as proselytizing and producing religious materials, are restricted. The requirement to obtain permission for most new religious activities is used to restrict religious communities' ability to import religious materials and construct religious venues. In addition to the cumbersome approval requirements, the decree 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 ethnic minority Christians.

Lao authorities continue to view the spread of Christianity among ethnic minorities, particularly those who have long resisted or resented government control, as an "American import" that potentially threatens the communist political system. The Lao government is either unwilling or unable to take action publicly against provincial authorities or security officials who commit serious abuses against ethnic minority Protestants. However, LFNC officials have sought at times to resolve disputes privately between religious groups and provincial officials.

Religious Freedom Conditions

Abuses in Ethnic Minority Areas: Local officials in various provinces reportedly interfered with the right of Protestants to conduct religious activities in many locations, such as Saravan, Vientiane, Bokeo, Savannakhet, Khammouan, Luang Namtha, and Luang Prabang provinces. The most serious abuses during the past year included detentions, forced evictions, arrests, denials of government services, and forced renunciations of faith.

In January 2011, at least nine ethnic minority Protestants were detained in the Khammouan province and charged with holding "a secret meeting" for celebrating Christmas without prior approval. Most were freed after paying heavy fines, but two pastors remain in jail. The pastors refuse to renounce their faith to gain their release.

In July 2011, police reportedly detained a pastor and three others from Sounya village in the Luang Namtha province. The pastor remains in detention and officials ordered all Protestants in the village to cease worshiping in private homes. In 2009, police tore down the Sounya village church and have denied them a permit to rebuild because they do not belong to one of the officially recognized religious organizations.

In August 2011, authorities reportedly confiscated the church and land from ethnic minority Protestants in Savannakhet Province because they did not have official permission to build or to meet. According to an NGO, at least 20 other churches are operating in Savannakhet without official permission.

A Protestant leader from Luang Prabang City was arrested and charged with “spreading a foreign religion and eradicating Lao traditional religion” after he instructed several new converts to burn their animist-associated items. In March 2011, local LFNC officials helped secure his release.

Forced Renunciations of Faith: In the past year, there continued to be reports of forced renunciations of faith among ethnic minority Protestants. Provincial officials threaten, detain, and deny government services to force individuals to renounce their faith. In addition, officials have threatened entire villages by denying schooling to children and access to water projects, land, and medical care.

In July 2011, police detained a Protestant from the Luang Prabang province and ordered him to return to traditional animist worship. He refused and may still be detained.

Public reports indicated that provincial officials organized to stop the spread of unauthorized Protestantism in Savannakhet province. LEC leaders have sought to intervene in this matter with local police and government officials. In August 2011, officials in Nonsawang village ordered 10 ethnic minority Protestants to renounce their faith or be evicted from their fields, to which they refused. They have not yet been evicted from their fields. In December 2011 in Natoo village, officials threatened to destroy a Protestant church and arrest its leaders unless they renounced their faith. This action occurred after police in a nearby village placed eight Protestant leaders in wooden stocks until they paid a fine for organizing an unauthorized Christmas celebration.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

Most U.S. assistance programs in Laos invest in public health, economic development, and counter-narcotics programs, and recently, new security sector reform programs. There is a small religious freedom training program for Lao officials. However, human rights, rule of law, and good governance programs for Laos are very small and are not funded at the level of other assistance programs. In order to promote freedom of religion or belief further in Laos, the U.S. government should:

- Initiate a formal human rights mechanism to address regularly such issues as ethnic and religious discrimination, torture and other forms of ill-treatment in prisons, unlawful arrest and detention, lack of due process and an independent judiciary, and refugee resettlement;
- Initiate human rights and religious tolerance training as part of any new U.S.-Laos security sector reform programs, ensure that participants in such programs are vetted to confirm that they have not been implicated in any human rights abuses, and deny U.S. training, visas, or assistance to those who engaged in violations of human rights, including religious freedom;
- Provide technical assistance and human rights programs that support the protection of religious freedom, including programs focused on: revising Decree 92; provincial official training; Laotian police, religious leaders, and academics training and exchange programs; 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
- Continue 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.

Please see USCIRF's 2012 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Laos.