

LAOS

Serious religious freedom abuses continue in Laos. The Lao government restricts religious practice through its legal code and has not curtailed religious freedom abuses in some rural areas. Provincial officials continue to violate the freedom of religion or belief 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'is living in urban areas. Based on these ongoing 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, is now generally free from restrictions and 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 their facilities. Officials with the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), the agency tasked with monitoring religious activity and carrying out the government's 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. The government requires all Protestant groups to be part of either the LEC or the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, allegedly to prevent "disharmony," and has not allowed other Protestant denominations to apply for recognition, making their activities illegal and subject to harassment, detention, or other serious abuses. For example, in some provincial areas, Methodist congregations cannot gather for worship, build religious venues, or conduct Christian funeral services. The Methodists and other Protestant denominations continue to seek legal recognition.

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. They also complain that the requirement to obtain permission for most new religious activities is used to restrict their 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.

The Lao government has been either unwilling or unable to take action publicly against provincial authorities or security officials who commit serious abuses against ethnic minority Protestants. Lao authorities continue to view the rapid 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. However, LFNC officials at times have sought to resolve disputes privately between religious groups and provincial officials.

Religious Freedom Conditions

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

In January 2011, at least nine ethnic minority Protestants were detained in Nakoon village, Hinboun district, 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, Wanna and Yohan, remain in jail and reportedly are in poor health. The two have refused to gain their freedom by renouncing their faith, according to their families.

In July 2011, police reportedly detained Pastor Seng Aroun and three other men from Sounya village, Namtha district, Luang Namtha province. Pastor Aroun remains in detention and authorities have ordered all Protestants in the village to cease worship in private homes. In 2009, police tore down the Sounya village church and have not given them a permit to build another structure 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 Dongpaiwan village, Saybuil district, Savannakhet Province because they did not have official permission to build or to meet. The villagers claimed they did not want to affiliate with the LEC. According to the non-governmental organization Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF), at least 20 other churches are operating in Savannakhet without official permission.

In March 2011, local LFNC officials intervened to secure the release of Abee Weng, a Protestant leader from Luang Prabang city. He was arrested and charged initially with “spreading a foreign religion and eradicating Lao traditional religion” after he instructed several new converts to burn their items associated with traditional animist religious practice.

Forced Renunciations of Faith: In the past year, there continued to be reports of forced renunciations of faith, entirely among ethnic minority Protestants. Lao provincial officials use threats, detentions, and denial of 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 Vong Veu, a Protestant from Pookong village, Viengkhan district, Luang Prabang province and ordered him to return to traditional animist worship. He refused and may still be detained.

In late August 2011, officials in Nonsawang village, Thapangthong district, Savannakhet province ordered 10 ethnic minority Protestants to renounce their faith or be evicted from their fields. The Christians refused to recant but have not yet been evicted from their rice paddies, according to HRWLRF.

In December 2011, officials threatened to destroy a Protestant church in Natoo village, Palansai district, Savannakhet province and to arrest its leaders unless they renounced their faith. This action came soon after police in nearby Boukham village placed eight Protestant leaders in wooden stocks until they paid a fine for organizing a large, unauthorized Christmas celebration. It has been reported publicly that provincial officials have organized to stop the spread of unauthorized Protestantism in Savannakhet province. Leaders from the LEC have sought to intervene in this matter with local police and government officials.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

Most U.S. assistance programs in Laos invest in public health, economic development, and counter-narcotics programs, although new security sector reform programs started in the past year. There is a small religious freedom training programs 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 further promote freedom of religion or belief 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 any officers participating in such programs are thoroughly vetted to confirm that 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 violations of human rights, including religious freedom;
- Initiate technical assistance and human rights programs that support the goals of protecting and promoting religious freedom, including: rule of law programs and legal exchanges that focus on revising Decree 92; training for provincial officials on international human rights standards and Laotian laws regarding the freedom of religion; training and exchange programs 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
- 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.