

Institute on Religion and Public Policy

Report on Religious Freedom in Laos

Executive Summary

(1) Laos, a small country in Southeast Asia, is both ethnically and religiously diverse. Ethnic Lao are traditionally Theravada Buddhist and the remaining population practices a variety of religions including many versions of animism and Christianity. While no official religion exists, the government has elevated the status of Theravada Buddhism, financially and legally. The government has enacted several laws which complicate the status of religion in the country. The freedom to believe or not believe in a religion one chooses exists, but one can only practice his or her religion within the limitations set forth by the government, and with their approval. The approval process is challenging and respect for religion does not exist in many parts of the country. Laos needs to improve their religious laws by ensuring their overall implementation and treating all religions equally.

Institute on Religion and Public Policy

(2) The Institute on Religion and Public Policy is an international, inter-religious non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. The Institute works globally to promote fundamental rights and religious freedom in particular, with government policy-makers, religious leaders, business executives, academics, non-governmental organizations and others. Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, the Institute encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world.

Demographics

(3) Laos has a population of 6.4 million people inhabiting an area of 85,000 square miles in Southeast Asia. Between 40 and 50% of the population are ethnically Lao and Theravada Buddhists. In Laos there are thought to be about 48 different ethnic minorities, which make up most of the remaining population. These minorities practice different versions of animist religions. Animism remains so prominent in Laos that elements of it have also been incorporated into Theravada Buddhism. Catholics and Protestants are a combined 2% of the population, with an estimated 45,000 Catholics, mostly ethnic Vietnamese and 100,000 Protestants, ethnic Mon-Khmer groups. There are also about 400 Muslims in the country, who are not citizens, but foreign permanent residents.

History of Religious Freedom in Laos

(4) Laos has had a difficult history of ensuring religious freedom for its people. While religious freedom is legally mandated in the Constitution, there have been local and national laws that impede the implementation of the freedom. Many laws are interpreted strictly on a local basis. Therefore, in urban centers, religious tolerance and freedom are more widespread than in many rural areas. There has been a history of forced conversions in the Katin region that often ends with violence or forced imprisonment or relocation. The main roadblock for religious freedom is that all groups need to stay within strict guidelines in order for their practices to be protected or face a complex approval process. One of the guidelines that is enforced in some areas is that the religious practice must serve national interests.

(5) The government has also actively displayed a preference for Buddhism over all other religions present in Laos. The government provides financial help to the Buddhist communities and is willing to grant exemptions to many of the restrictions placed on other religions. While there is no official religion, Buddhism does have an elevated status.

(6) The country also has a discrepancy in recognizing religions. Only three Christian groups are recognized, the Lao Evangelical Church, the Roman Catholic Church and 7th Day Adventism. Groups such as the Church of Christ, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Baptists are not recognized. Additionally, all Protestant groups are classified as a part of the two recognized Protestant churches.

Legal Status of Religion

(7) The Constitution of Laos went into effect in 1991 and provides for religious freedom in Article 30. The Article states that citizens have the right "to believe or to not believe in religions."

(8) Article 9 of the Constitution is one of the problems the country faces when implementing religious freedom. The Article declares that the state "respects and protects" Buddhism and other religious peoples. The state also encourages monks and other religious officials to work for the benefit of the country. The controversy arises because the article also states that the government discourages any acts or practices that create divisions among religious groups or persons. Local governments have often interpreted this to mean that they are allowed to place restrictions on certain religious groups or practices. The central government has acknowledged that the lack of implementation for religious laws comes primarily from the local government officials.

(9) The Prime Minister of Laos issued a decree in 2002 that places legal limitation on religion. Decree 92 declares that the government is the final legal arbiter for all defining rules for religious practice. The decree also gives the government the power to ensure that all religious practices “conform with laws and regulations.” The Decree was passed with the intent to extend religious freedom because all practices would be permitted after they had been approved, including proselytism, and the printing of religious material. However, due to either a lack of understanding of the law, or a disregard for it, much religious practice has been restricted.

(10) The combination of Article 9 and Decree 92 make for very complicated religious laws that are implemented differently in each part of the country. As it stands now, religious practices have to be approved by Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), a cover organization for the Lao’s People’s Revolutionary Party. The LFNC is responsible for the oversight of all religious practice. Because they have the ultimate right to approve religious practices they can also restrict it. One of the major hurdles of approval is proving that a religious practice serves Laos’ national interests, such as education or development. If the practice does not then there is right to restrict the practice. As a result of varied implementation of the law, the LFNC has had to become more active in protecting religious freedom and training more officials about the correct way to enforce the law.

(11) There is no religious instruction in any government-run school in Laos. No parochial or religious schools exist there either. However, most men spend time with Buddhists monks, receiving religion instruction and joining the monkhood temporarily. Most religious instruction in Laos comes from the religious institution itself.

Specific Instances of Religious Discrimination

(12) In the Katin region of Laos there have been several reports of religious abuses by local officials and of reports of forced conversions. In July 2008, the local government detained 80 Christians from 17 families. They were held without food until they renounced their faith. That same month a Christian from Katin died after he was forced by officials to drink alcohol; his family was then fined for an improper burial. The central government was asked to look into the case for any religious abuses. They concluded that the death was due to alcoholism and the fine was a result of a misunderstanding between the Christian and non-Christian communities.

(13) The Boukham region of Laos also experienced religious abuse in July 2008. Police interfered with Christian worship and detained a priest and four members of the church for two days. In August, the pastor of the same church and two church members were detained, but this time held until October. During this period, 55 other Christians were expelled from the village. In September 2009,

similar reports surfaced in Boukham. The priest was again detained and threatened with death if he did not renounce his faith. Christian children in the region have been denied schooling and water to the village has been shut off.

(14) Throughout Laos, there have been many reports that Christians have been pressured to renounce their faith, often with the threat of arrest. It is estimated that in July 2008 alone, 500 Christians were forced to do so, although many within the country would deny that any forced conversions occurred.

(15) In March 2009, officials in the Borikhamxay province of Laos destroyed a Christian church. The Christians in the province were not in the church because they were at a previously scheduled meeting with district officials. The police claimed that the church was torn down because it lacked official approval from the government. However, there have been previous reports of tensions between the police and the Christians after Christian residents faced pressure to relocate.

(16) On July 10, 2009, in Katin, the livestock of nine Christian families was slaughtered as a means to intimidate them to renounce their faith. In Laos, one pig is the equivalent to six weeks worth of salary, so the wellbeing of the families was compromised. The meat of the livestock was distributed to only non-Christians. There was no legal justification for the killing. A similar offense took place in September 2008.

U.S. Foreign Relations with Laos

(17) The United States began its relationship with Laos while it was under the control of the French in the 1950s. The relationship became stronger when Laos gained its independence in 1954. While fighting the Vietnam War, the United States' relationship with Laos became strained because some of the fighting was done on Laotian land. The U.S. also intervened in the Laotian civil war and as a result of the rising influence of the Communist party in Laos. The diplomatic relationship did not improve until 1982 when the government underwent improvements. In 1992, the U.S. sent an ambassador to Laos, signaling a better relationship.

(18) Since 1992, the U.S. and Laos have worked closely to finding American soldiers missing from the Vietnam War. The project has encouraged cooperation and improved the relationship.

(19) George W. Bush elevated Laos to the status of normal trade relations in 2005 by allowing the Bilateral Trade Agreement to come into force. In 2008, Laos received about \$18 million in aid from the United States. The money was to be spent to improve areas such as education, economic development, and government.

Conclusion

(20) Laos has complicated and poorly enforced religious laws that lead to the widespread abuse of religious freedom. While Decree 92 was implemented to expand the legal practice of religion and provide for government oversight, it has led to more religious discrimination on a local level. The government must change the law to ensure that religious minorities are protected from persecution and forced conversions, and they must properly train all local police. The LFNC must also treat all religions equally when evaluating and approving proposals to build churches and temples. Further, they must admit to the crimes of the local police and not justify them. The Constitution must also be amended to provide for the freedom of religious practice, and not just the freedom to believe. These changes will lead to a more equal treatment of all religious people, regardless of their affiliation.