

KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Laos trended the same as in 2017. It continued to be difficult to obtain and confirm details about religious freedom violations due to heavy government censorship and restrictions on freedom of information. Lao officials seek to control all perceived challenges to state authority and often characterize religious and ethnic minorities as potential agitators. The Lao constitution ostensibly protects its peoples' inherent right to religious freedom. However, as exemplified by Decree 315, corresponding rules and regulations pertaining to religious observance are excessively cumbersome, vaguely worded, and open to interpretation. This emboldened some local authorities to implement the spirit of the decree as they understand it rather than according to the decree. In 2018, communication between national and provincial government institutions remained limited, and local-level officials were often unaware of or unwilling to implement or enforce national laws and policies pertaining to religious freedom. As such, religious freedom conditions throughout the country varied widely by district, village, and province. In some parts of the country, religious freedom conditions were generally good, while in others—typically more rural and isolated areas—they remained quite poor. Some Lao authorities

remained deeply suspicious of Christians, sometimes resulting in social exclusion, harassment, and arbitrary detention by law enforcement officials. Throughout 2018, USCIRF continued to receive reports of harassment and persecution of Christians in Savannakhet, a province known for its religious intolerance. The Lao government has a long history of sentencing individuals to indefinite prison terms for expressing open criticism of the government or shedding light on its human rights abuses, including religious freedom violations, and the possibility of government retaliation prompted many people to self-censor. Furthermore, the Lao government maintained its policy of promoting Buddhism through various state institutions, including public school curricula, and at times incorporated Buddhist rituals or ceremonies in official state functions. Religious tensions were also manifest at the village level, indicating a degree of generalized social prejudice toward religious minorities.

In 2019, 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

- Urge the Lao government to:
 - Amend Decree 315 in order to clarify administrative procedures and enforcement mechanisms, and, in the meantime, hold accountable central, provincial, and local government and law enforcement officials acting in contravention of Laos' laws, the Lao constitution, and international standards; and
 - Permit all religious communities—particularly those located in rural and isolated areas—to operate freely regardless of their recognition status; and
 - Support programs that increase understanding and awareness of Lao government policies and practices relating to religious freedom—including government restrictions and social hostilities—among national and local-level officials, law enforcement, and religious leaders representing all beliefs.
- The U.S. Congress should:
 - Send regular congressional delegations to Laos and hold hearings focused on religious freedom and related human rights to collect and disseminate information about overall conditions and specific violations.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Lao People's Democratic Republic

GOVERNMENT

Communist State

POPULATION

7,234,171

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Baha'i faith

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*:

64.7% Buddhist

1.7% Christian

31.4% No Religion

2.1% Other/Not Stated

("No Religion" or "Other" include Folk Religions, Animism, the Baha'i faith, Confucianism, and Taoism)

*Estimates compiled from the CIA World Factbook

BACKGROUND

Laos is an authoritarian, single-party communist state with a dismal human rights record. In July 2018, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) [emphasized](#) the country's highly repressive environment and the government's refusal to respect the Lao people's basic civil and political rights, and criticized authorities for systemic human rights abuses—including enforced disappearances, the treatment of ethnic and religious minorities, and endemic restrictions on the freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly. The OHCHR specifically noted "reports of persecution and discrimination against Christians, including arbitrary arrests." Lao authorities seek to control all perceived challenges to state authority and regulate individuals or groups they regard as being critical of the government. Furthermore, government officials tend to be highly suspicious of certain ethnic and religious groups, particularly Christians, and often characterize them as potential agitators.

The Lao government is decentralized. As a consequence, religious freedom conditions throughout the country can vary widely by district, village, and province. Laos has a long tradition of highly independent provincial governance. As such, national leaders often are reluctant to pressure provincial authorities to fall in

line with federal policies, and communication between their respective jurisdictions can be lacking. Local officials are often unaware of or unwilling to implement or enforce national laws. In some parts of the country, religious freedom conditions are generally good, while in others they are quite poor.

In addition to the arbitrary arrest of Christians noted above, the Lao government has a long history of sentencing individuals to indefinite prison terms for expressing open criticism of the government or shedding light on its human rights abuses. Throughout 2018, the wife of Lao civil society leader Sombath Somphone—along with family and supporters—continued to seek information regarding his disappearance more than six years ago. However, by the end of the reporting period, Lao government officials had not been forthcoming about their investigation. During a July 2018 OHCHR session in Geneva, Lao delegate Bounkeut Sangsomsak evaded questions regarding Somphone's disappearance, accused him of having possessed up to two million dollars in undeclared assets, and attacked his wife for steadfastly campaigning on Somphone's behalf. The OHCHR subsequently issued a [report](#) detailing more than a dozen enforced disappearances in Laos and the government's persistent failures to adequately investigate.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2018

State Administration of Religious Activity

The Lao constitution guarantees the “right and freedom to believe or not to believe in religion” and ensures all citizens equal treatment before the law, regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliations. The constitution also details various religious regulations, which are implemented through decrees. Decree 315 is the latest iteration in a series of policies and regulations pertaining to religious practice and observance.

It describes the legal space in which religious organizations are required to operate and mandates a complex, multilayered approval process for nearly all religious activities. The language is vague and open to multiple interpretations, often emboldening local authorities to implement the spirit of the decree as they understand it rather than according to the law.

The Lao government officially acknowledges four religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Baha’i faith. Within Christianity, the government recognizes three denominations—the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC), the Catholic Church, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Lao authorities typically urge Christians of other denominations to register with the LEC, which serves as an umbrella organization for all other Christian groups. Animist beliefs, characterized by the notion that all living and inanimate things possess a spirit and consciousness, are also widespread throughout much of Lao society and often blend with the practices of religious groups.

Some Christians find the government-prescribed religious labels too narrow or at odds with their own personal doctrine or beliefs. As a result, some choose not to join a recognized religious institution and instead attend services at unofficial house churches. While technically illegal, house churches are fairly common throughout much of the country, and in some areas they are more or less tolerated by local authorities. In other—predominantly rural—areas, Christians worshipping in unregistered house churches face social exclusion from their community, harassment, and occasional deten-

tion by local authorities. For example, in August 2018, authorities in Nakai District, Khammouane Province, arrested a man for performing worship services in his home without paying weekly fees to local officials and for refusing to renounce his faith. Because village elders sometimes disapprove of Christian religious activities,

local authorities often feel justified in committing these abuses under the misguided notion of preserving communal peace and stability.

The Lao government oversees religious affairs through two primary administrative bodies:

the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) and the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC). MOHA regulates virtually all aspects of religious life. MOHA approval is required to assemble for religious purposes, construct new houses of worship or modify existing facilities, and establish new congregations in districts or villages that previously had none. In addition, MOHA offices have authority to restrict religious activities they perceive to be at odds with local customs or national policies. MOHA may also shut down any religious activity it deems to threaten national stability, peace and order, the environment, or unity between religious and ethnic groups. Furthermore, all religious groups holding religious services—or even secular community events—must register with MOHA, submit annual plans for all scheduled activities outside the scope of routine operations, and provide information on individuals internally elected or appointed to positions of influence or authority. These regulations pose obstacles to routine religious observance and often preclude collaboration between faith communities operating in separate administrative jurisdictions, a necessity in many remote, rural areas where clergy are scarce. For example, in 2018, clergy and members of the Catholic diocese in Luang Prabang Province had difficulty traveling; authorities required priests and parishioners to request permission first before visiting other villages and assigned a soldier to accompany them, allegedly for their protection.

The LFNC works broadly with both religious organizations and local officials to inform and educate

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stakeholders on national religious policies. The LFNC's stated purpose is to alleviate ethnic and religious tensions and clarify existing regulations by meeting with and facilitating dialogue between provincial authorities, local religious leaders, clergy, and members of faith communities. In the past, the LFNC has sometimes used these engagements to promote intolerant views toward certain religious groups and institutions. In December 2018, LFNC and other officials in Khammouane Province reportedly told a Christian man he was not permitted to hold meetings or organize ceremonies, and more ominously, that he would have no recourse if anything happened to him because Christianity was not an officially recognized religion, which is untrue.

Violations against Christians

Throughout 2018, it remained difficult to obtain and confirm information regarding religious freedom violations in Laos. The Lao government continued to control virtually all domestic media outlets, prompting many people to self-censor. Religious believers, civil society advocates, and some ethnic minority groups continued to regulate their own statements and public behavior in order to avoid scrutiny and possible retaliation for exposing information or abuses that may discredit the government.

In 2018, local officials in some provinces, particularly Savannakhet Province, continued to mistreat ethnic and religious minorities. In November 2018, authorities in Vilabouly District arrested four Christians, including a 78-year-old grandmother, for holding worship services without a permit; all four were held for a week before being released. In December 2018, authorities in Nakanong Village arrested seven Christians after deeming their Christmas church service to be illegal. Local authorities also demolished the church's stage, cut its power line, destroyed its sound system, and seized personal property from the congregation. The detainees were freed several days later in early January 2019, after the reporting period. Also, in December, four Christians

were arrested and held for several days for conducting what local authorities interpreted as unlawful religious services in Keovilai

Village, and another five were detained in Non Soung Village for communicating with a pastor from a neighboring village about the prospect of working together without obtaining the required

approval in advance.

Although Christians represent only a small minority of the population, many local religious leaders assert they are now the fastest-growing religious community in Laos. Some Lao authorities harbor an acute distrust of Christians, often conflating individual believers with what they perceive as European and American imperialism. For example, local officials and even fellow community members have threatened Christian families to renounce their faith or face eviction from their villages or the confiscation of their land titles if they do not. In November 2018, a regional governor in northern Laos stated he would not tolerate Christianity in the area because it was a "foreign religion." He issued an ultimatum to 20 Christian families: leave the village within one month or go to jail. At least five families renounced their faith to avoid imprisonment.

Promotion of Buddhism

Throughout 2018, the Lao government continued to promote Buddhism through various state institutions, and at times incorporated Buddhist rituals or ceremonies in official state functions. Authorities usually framed these efforts as an attempt to instill pride in Lao customs and reinforce national identity by regarding Buddhism not solely as a religion, but also as an integral component of the country's cultural heritage. The Lao government also reportedly urged highly influential Buddhist leaders to include progovernment messaging in their religious sermons.

The Lao government continued to promote Buddhist practices throughout the public school system. Although education officials insisted the Buddhist curriculum is taught in a secular manner and that non-Buddhist parents have the right to remove their

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children from these lessons if it makes them uncomfortable, in the past some students have reportedly been required to pray in Buddhist temples as a precondition for grade advancement. However, this practice appears to be limited and may reflect the individual prejudice of some Buddhist teachers rather than official government policy.

Communal Religious Tensions

In 2018, some Christians living in multifaith communities reportedly chose not to attend village-level Buddhist or animist ceremonies because they stated even passive engagement conflicts with their own religious beliefs. The apprehension of some Christians to participate in ceremonial offerings to the village guardian spirit has in some areas agitated local animists because they fear the spirit may collectively punish the village. This has at times sparked

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localized tensions in rural villages and led to some Christians being asked to leave their homes. In February, the chief of Nasathoung Village in Khammouane Province threatened at least nine Christian families with incarceration if they did not leave the village or renounce their faith. Animists have also reportedly interfered in Christian burial rituals, as some believe that burying rather than cremating the dead will result in disharmony and conflict with village spirits.

Treatment of Muslims and Baha'is

There are only two active mosques in Laos, both located in the capital, Vientiane, and the Muslim community does not report much difficulty practicing their faith openly. Leaders of the Muslim Association, a small group that manages Muslim community affairs and government outreach, reportedly meet and maintain good relationships with MOHA and LFNC officials. Likewise, Baha'i leaders in Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Luang Prabang seldom report interference in or restriction of their religious activities.

U.S. POLICY

The United States and Laos continue to cooperate on many levels under a Comprehensive Partnership announced in 2016. Throughout 2018, the two governments worked jointly to facilitate economic development and global health security, promote education and strengthen people-to-people ties, partner on counternarcotics activities, and address various Vietnam War legacy issues including the clearing of unexploded ordnance and accounting for missing American personnel. The U.S. government also continues to assist the Lao government in developing legal and regulatory tools to facilitate greater participation in

regional and international trade agreements and to better integrate the Lao economy with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

In February 2018, two of the largest, highest-ranking congressional delegations to visit Laos met with counterparts in

the Lao government to discuss ways to strengthen ties between the U.S. Congress and the Lao National Assembly. Additionally, in April 2018, Representative Jackie Speier of California [met](#) with Lao government officials in Vientiane to discuss ways to enhance cooperation on defense issues, public security, and law enforcement under the Comprehensive Partnership. In addition to her official engagements, Speier visited two Buddhist temples to learn about local silk weaving traditions and to give alms, gestures that served to highlight social and cultural ties between the two countries.

Ongoing cultural engagement—along with the sustained military relationship between the two countries—have helped build trust that, over time, has strengthened the United States' position to raise human rights and religious freedom issues with Laos. In May 2018, a high-level military [delegation](#) from the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command met with Lao government officials to discuss the bilateral defense relationship, emphasize the United States' commitment to the Indo-Pacific region, and consider ways to enhance the Comprehensive Partnership by expanding military-to-military ties. In September, the U.S.

military [hosted](#) members of the Lao Ministry of National Defense at Camp Smith, Hawaii, for the 13th Lao-United States Bilateral Defense Dialogue. Participants identified and discussed various opportunities for enhanced bilateral and multilateral cooperation.