

Introduction

The Lao constitution guarantees citizens the right to ‘believe or not to believe in religions’ (Article 43). However, state protection is limited to undefined ‘lawful activities’ by Buddhists and followers of other religions, and ‘all acts of creating division between religions and classes of people are prohibited’ (Article 9). There is no further clarification of the terms ‘creating division’ and ‘lawful activities’. Ambiguous terms, bureaucratic obstacles to registration and weak rule of law combine to undermine freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for Laos’ religious minorities, including Catholics, Protestants, Muslims and Baha’is. FoRB violations in Laos often go unnoticed by the international community.

Violations of freedom of religion or belief

There have been some improvements in the protection of FoRB especially since Laos has sought to develop its participation in international organisations and world affairs. Over the past decade there has been a reduction in the number of long-term Christian prisoners of conscience. Furthermore, some sources believe that higher authorities have intervened in cases where church leaders had been arrested and detained without sufficient evidence.

However, improvements in the level of religious freedom are most keenly felt in urban areas, and efforts by the government to promote and protect this right are often undermined by social hostility and weak rule of law at the local level. These issues result in restrictions not only on the manifestation and practice of minority religions, but also on the ability of citizens to choose and change their religion.

Violations against Protestant Christians

The conditions for Christians vary significantly. However, in recent years Christians in certain areas have reported incidents of:

- Arbitrary detention
- Forced eviction
- Confiscation of land and livestock
- Destruction of property
- Harassment and discrimination.

Religious minorities can also be prevented from choosing and changing their religion by local authorities. This is especially true for Protestant Christianity, which is still seen by some as a foreign religion at odds with traditional culture. Christians are arrested and sometimes charged for explaining the Bible to people of other religions and ‘spreading the Christian faith’. In her 2009 report the then UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Asma Jahangir, noted that the Baha’i, Muslim, Catholic and other religious minority communities appear to refrain from missionary activities in order to prevent ‘problems with the authorities’.

In August 2016 the government issued Decree 315 to replace the Prime Minister’s Decree on Management and Protection of Religious Activities, No. 92/PM. The Decree came into force immediately after it was released. Like its predecessor, Decree 315 requires adherents to receive approval from the government for various religious activities: responsibility for approving or refusing permission has moved from the Lao Front for National Construction to the Ministry of Home Affairs. The decree includes some language which is ambiguous and could be open to abuse, and the registration requirements are still restrictive. However, some religious groups say the new decree provides greater clarity about the status of religious groups. Much will depend on how the decree is implemented by local authorities.

Recommendations

- Urge the government of Laos to remove reservations to Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and ensure that the protective measures enshrined in Article 18 are applied to all citizens.
- Urge the government of Laos to release any person detained in connection with their religion or belief, and to investigate immediately cases of wrongful imprisonment.
- Raise cases of human rights violations and restrictions on the right to freedom of religion or belief through all available means, including annual dialogues and bilateral meetings and exchanges.
- Advise embassies in Laos to develop relationships with key religious leaders; and to arrange, in consultation with local contacts, visits to imprisoned religious leaders and communities of religious minorities where safe to do so.
- Strongly encourage the participation of Lao civil society in preparations for human rights-related reporting, including the UN Universal Periodic Review process.

As Christians, we stand with everyone facing injustice because of their religion or belief.