



Religion

Population

Area

- Buddhists : **52.8%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **41.9%**
- Christians : **3.2%**
- Others : **2.1%**

6,918,000

236,800 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Freedom of religion and belief is enshrined in the laws of Laos. The 1991 constitution, revised in 2003, describes in detail the rights of the people, and freedom of religion is listed first.^[1] In practice, however, attitudes towards religious freedom in Laos are in many respects similar to those of its neighbour, Vietnam, no doubt because of the ideological proximity between the two Communist parties in power in Vientiane and Hanoi. The system can be described as one of petition and concession, in which religious organisations seek permission from state authorities to carry out certain and the secular authorities, in turn, grant or deny their requests.

The system is based on Decree 92 on “religious practices”, ratified in 2002, which governs all religious matters in the country. This statutory order was replaced on 16th August 2016 by Decree 315. Signed by Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith, the new decree deals with “the governance and protection of religious activities” in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic.^[2] There is little information about the practical application of this new rule, though the general philosophy of the ruling regime’s religious policy is not likely to change. Even though religious freedom is enshrined in the constitution, the above-mentioned decrees cover procedures that allow the state to control and interfere in the religious sphere. The government recognises four religious groups: Buddhists, Christians, Muslims and Bahá’ís. Among Christian groups, the authorities have granted administrative recognition only to the Catholic Church, the Lao Evangelical Church and the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

In Laos religious affiliation tends to follow ethnic boundaries. About 55 percent of the population of Laos is ethnically Lao, the majority of whom are Buddhists. The Lao dominate national political life and Laotian political leaders belong de facto, at least culturally, to Theravada Buddhism. The direct consequence of this strong Buddhist influence is that, despite 40 years of officially communist rule, the constitution, as well as decrees 92 and 315 contain a number of exceptions for

Buddhism. In practice, this means that Buddhist monks and pagodas are not subject to the same restrictions as members of other religions and other places of worship. At the national level, this closeness between Buddhism and the state means that Sangkharat, the supreme patriarch of Buddhism in Laos, maintains close ties with the country's political leaders. Likewise, in the provinces, it is not uncommon for government officials to invite Buddhist monks to bless new buildings.

Consequently, the vast majority of restrictions on religious freedom affect primarily religious minorities, most notably Protestant Christians who make up less than 1 percent of the population.^[3] They also affect the country's 48 ethnic minorities, who constitute about 45 percent of the population. The lack of freedom of information and strict government control of the media make it difficult to obtain accurate information about violations of religious freedom in Laos. Persecution of Protestant Christians occurs mostly in rural areas. Conversion to Christianity can provoke hostile reactions from local animists who perceive Christianity as a "foreign element" likely to upset the protecting spirits of the village. To preserve "harmony" and avoid public disturbances, government authorities tend to be harsh with Christians, periodically forcing recent converts to declare their allegiance to ancestors and animist spirits.^[4] The authorities' attitude varies greatly from one province to another, with the most repressive policies implemented in the more remote and isolated areas.

Incidents

On 8th September 2015, a Protestant clergyman, Rev Singkeaw Wongkonpheng, from Chompet District, Luang Prabang Province, northern Laos, was stabbed to death by several men who had broken into his home. According to a report on the incident by the Human Rights Watch for Lao Religious Freedom (HRWLRF), local villagers suspect the attackers wanted to kidnap the pastor and his wife because of their proselytising activities. One of the attackers, who was wounded and hospitalised, may have been a police officer. The pastor was killed during the attempted abduction.^[5]

Also in September 2015, HRWLRF reported that, in Savannakhet Province, a Christian with diabetes died in prison from lack of proper treatment. The married father of six, Mr Tiang, from Huey, a village in Atsaphangthong District, was arrested and convicted in February 2015, along with four other Christians, for "illegally practising medicine". Mr Tiang was sentenced to nine months in jail and a heavy fine for praying at the bedside of a dying woman.^[6]

According to the NGO Portes Ouvertes, on 21st May 2017, a student at a Bible school, a member of the Hmong ethnic group, was arrested by police on charges of spreading the Gospel on his way to a Christian meeting in a neighbouring village.^[7] According to the same NGO, on 2nd December 2016, a national holiday in Laos, police arrived in a village in Luang Prabang Province and rounded up local Christians. The seven Christian families living in the village were forced to hand over their official papers (title deeds, family registration certificates, identity cards) to the police, who then expelled them.^[8]

Prospects for freedom of religion

Although the full scope of Decree 315 has yet to be fully evaluated, it appears that the government's religious policy will not change much in the short term. The ruling regime will not radically alter its ways as long as its Vietnamese and Chinese neighbours do not modify their own religious policies. However, a positive sign came on 11th December 2016 when the local Catholic Church in Vientiane organised the beatification ceremony of 17 of its martyrs.^[9] The ceremony was a very delicate matter since the martyrs (11 priests – one Laotian and ten French – plus six lay people) were killed between 1957 and 1975, most notably by the Communists now in power. The local Church cautiously portrayed them as "ancestors in the faith", avoiding the use of the term "martyr".^[10] However, until the last moment, Church leaders believed the authorities might ban the ceremony. Instead, government officials did attend the ceremony, including a senior official with the Lao Front for National Construction. In his address, at the end of the beatification Mass, the senior official emphasised that religions of whatever description work to build the nation. Bishop Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhanekhoun of Paksé, who became a cardinal on 21st May 2017, described as historic the fact "that the Church was able to beatify

some of its martyrs in the capital of a country still ruled by a Communist regime”^[11]

Endnotes / Sources

[1] Lao People’s Democratic Republic’s Constitution of 1991 with Amendments through 2003, [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Laos_2003.pdf?lang=en), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Laos_2003.pdf?lang=en, (accessed 21st February 2018).

[2] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2016 Report on International Religious Freedom – Laos, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/268986.pdf>, (accessed 12th February 2018).

[3] Most Protestants, including members of the Evangelical Church of Laos, are members of ethnic minorities (in particular, the Hmong, Mon-Khmer, Khmu and Yao). Catholics tend to be divided between ethnic Lao and these minorities.

[4] In recent years, a number of incidents have been reported: village chiefs calling villagers to official rallies in which Christians, especially new converts, are required to participate in the traditional communal ‘sacred water’ rituals. This ancient shamanic practice consists of drinking a liquid prepared by the village shaman and taking an oath of allegiance to the spirits (phi), which, for Christians, is a form of apostasy.

[5] ‘Meurtre d’un pasteur protestant dans la province de Luang Prabang’, Églises d’Asie, 24th September 2015, <http://eglasie.mepasie.org/asia-du-sud-est/laos/2015-09-24-meurtre-d2019un-pasteur-protestant-dans-la-province-de-luang-prabang>, (accessed 12th February 2018).

[6] Ibid.

[7] ‘Le Laos fait partie des 5 derniers États communistes au monde. Le bouddhisme y est considéré comme un élément de l’identité culturelle et spirituelle du pays’, Portes Ouvertes, <https://www.portesouvertes.fr/persecution-des-chretiens/profils-pays/laos/>, (accessed 12th February 2018).

[8] Ibid.

[9] ‘Béatification des 17 martyrs du Laos : « Un acte bénéfique tant pour l’Église que l’État laotien »’, Églises d’Asie, 3rd February 2017, <http://eglasie.mepasie.org/asia-du-sud-est/laos/2017-02-03-beatification-des-17-martyrs-du-laos-ab-un-acte-benefique-tant-pour-l2019Église-que-l2019État-laotien-bb>, (accessed 12th February 2018).

[10] ‘Cardinal Louis-Marie Ling : « J’aimerais trouver des moyens de coopérer et d’entretenir de meilleures relations avec le gouvernement »’, Églises d’Asie, 27th June 2017, <http://eglasie.mepasie.org/asia-du-sudest/laos/2017-06-21-cardinal-louis-marie-ling-ab-j2019aimerais-trouver-des-moyens-de-cooperer-bb>, (accessed 12th February 2018).

[11] ‘Béatification des 17 martyrs du Laos : ...’, op. cit. (accessed 12th February 2018).