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LAOS: The Disturbing Prospect for Religious Freedom

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The religious freedom picture in Laos is complex, not least due to non-religious factors such as ethnicity, and the state's opposition to freedom of information. However, it does appear that religious freedom conditions have improved in the last few years. But the central government's political agenda remains fundamentally hostile to religious freedom, despite government claims that religious freedom violations are caused by an alleged inability to control local officials. This hostility as manifested in "isolated" incidents of religious freedom violations – against Protestants, Buddhists, Animists, Baha'is, Muslims and Catholics - seems set to continue.

Between 20 April and 15 May, local officials detained 12 ethnic minority Christians in the southern province of Savannakhet for refusing to renounce their religious belief, the Paris-based Lao Movement for Human Rights reported. In March, district officials in the northern province of Luang Prabang ordered 35 Christian families to renounce their faith, US-based Christian Freedom International reported. When they refused, officials moved in with the families and threatened to stay until they complied with the demand. Just one month earlier, officials in another southern province, Attapeu, issued an ultimatum to local Christians to renounce their faith, leave the village or - if they insisted on staying put and keeping their belief - face death, according to British-based Christian Solidarity Worldwide.

These are just the most recent of continuing reports about how Christians in Laos, particularly those who are members of ethnic minorities, have been forced to renounce their faith, with severe consequences for those who refuse.

Although Protestant Christians seem to be bearing the brunt of the state's assault against religion, other religious communities must also deal with state restrictions. The state retains tight control over the Buddhist sangha – the clergy – and their training, as well as Buddhist temples and other facilities. The Animists, who are primarily made up of ethnic minorities, are permitted to maintain their practices but have been discouraged from engaging in "superstitious" activities. Baha'is have been forced to confine their activities to four state-approved centres because the government has not allowed them to open any more.

According to the US State Department, the small Muslim population came under greater state scrutiny in 2003. Only the two mosques in the capital Vientiane can function. Tito Banchong Thopanhong, the Catholic apostolic administrator of Luang Prabang, has not been permitted to visit his diocese in the north of the country since his appointment in 1999. Even as the state has "recognised" the Seventh Day Adventists, it has also actively "encouraged" them to join the state-approved Lao Evangelical Church (LEC).

These violations of religious freedom have taken place against a backdrop of deplorable human rights conditions. Lao residents and foreigners alike have been arbitrarily arrested and imprisoned. In October 1999, over 100 Lao students and teachers were imprisoned for staging a pro-democracy demonstration in Vientiane. In 2000, an Australian couple who provided security services for foreign organisations in Laos was imprisoned as government hostages in a dispute with a foreign mining firm. In June 2003 two European journalists and a Hmong-American pastor were detained for their alleged involvement in a firefight between the military and the Hmongs in a remote part of Laos. Meanwhile, the state continues to wage a "war of attrition" against the seriously-depleted ethnic Hmong minority.

However, despite all it has tried to do, the avowedly atheistic Communist state has been unable to eliminate religion, which remains a central component of Laotian culture nearly three decades after the founding of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Today, as many as 65 per cent of the population are Buddhists. Animists, who are primarily members of ethnic minority groups, account for approximately 40 percent of the population. Roman Catholics number around 30,000, while Protestant Christians, the fastest growing religious community, already number 60,000. In addition, there are as many as 5,000 Baha'is, approximately 1,000 Adventists, and several hundred Muslims.

The state displayed its "accommodation" toward religion in late December 2003 when it announced it had authorised the casting of 200,000 Buddhist amulets that would be distributed to the country's Buddhist monks as well as gold statues of a 14th century Laotian monarch to be displayed at Buddhist temples around the country. Deutsche Presse-Agentur noted that the statues and the amulets would be blessed by 100 Buddhist monks.

It would be naive to think that "improved" relations between the state and Buddhism necessarily indicate that the regime is softening its religious policy. Signs of accommodation may simply reflect the adoption of an alternative strategy for achieving the same objective. In many societies with a dominant religion, the authoritarian state has effectively manipulated that community in its continuing effort to repress smaller religious groups and to maintain control over all religious communities and their activities. The Burmese regime's "co-option" of Buddhism is seen as a means to repress the smaller religious communities in that country. Indeed, some non-Buddhist religious leaders in Laos have advanced a similar claim, accusing the state of favouritism towards Buddhism at the expense of non-Buddhist religious groups. That non-Buddhist groups, particularly Protestant Christians, have been the primary targets of state repression appears to substantiate this claim.

Nonetheless, some argue that freedom for religious communities in Laos has improved considerably in recent years. Robert Seiple, the former US Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and a major proponent of "engagement" with Laos, contends that the Laotian state has made important, but often overlooked, progress towards religious freedom. In a May 2004 rebuttal to those who criticised the Lao government's record, Seiple argued that Lao officials have become more willing than ever to address religious freedom violations. Other holders of this view point out that between 1999 and 2001, government officials arbitrarily closed some 85 LEC churches nationwide. Since then - apart from isolated incidents, such as one in early 2003 when local officials tore down a church to create facilities for a nearby school - government officials seem to have halted large-scale closures of religious facilities. In addition, foreigners have been told that all religious prisoners were released by the end of 2003.

A significant factor in this dispute over the true state of religious freedom in Laos is the international community's lack of access to updated information about conditions on the ground. The Communist regime has refused requests by Amnesty International to visit the country, while foreign religious freedom advocacy groups have been able to visit only clandestinely. Foreign aid organisations, particularly those with religious affiliations, have generally been unwilling to share information about the conditions in-country out of fear that the Lao government would terminate their operations there. Currently, the most comprehensive and regularly-updated report on religious freedom is the International Religious Freedom Report published each year by the US State Department.

Non-religious factors have contributed to the complexity of the situation. Since many adherents of minority religions, particularly Protestant Christianity, are members of ethnic minority groups, ethnic tensions have loomed large. These tensions are most often played out in remote villages during disputes over resources. In some of these cases, foreign missionaries have been accused of telling new converts they should neither share resources given them by foreigners with non-believers nor continue to participate in traditional village rituals that may have spiritual components. In those circumstances, local officials, who are essentially village chiefs, have made judgments in these disputes favouring the maintenance of unity and harmony in the larger community at the expense of minority rights.

Indeed, central government officials have defended themselves from accusations that the state actively represses religious communities by asserting that they are unable to control local authorities. According to one individual who discussed the state's religious policy with senior Lao officials, the former deputy minister of the Lao Front for National Unification (the Lao counterpart to the Vietnamese Fatherland Front and the Chinese United Front Department) maintained that the central government's ability to protect religious freedom was hampered by its lack of political influence over the provincial governors who have more direct administrative control over the villages where religious problems have occurred. These same officials claimed that the lack of political control has been exacerbated by the central government's difficulty in gaining physical access to many villages because of the lack of roads and vehicles.

Finally, until recently no detailed set of laws and regulations on religion has existed to provide the basis for the protection of religious freedom. Although the constitution guarantees religious freedom, central government officials and their foreign supporters have argued that the lack of specific regulations on religious matters meant that the central government had limited capacity to enforce the constitutional guarantees. This also allowed local officials to interpret and implement the constitutional provision as they chose.

In July 2002, partly due to internal political needs and partly as a result of foreign pressure, Prime Minister Bounnhang Vorachith promulgated "Decree 92", which spelled out how religion is to be regulated. The Lao government and its supporters touted the decree as a major positive step toward protecting religious freedom. Both government officials and Lao religious leaders noted that the government had consulted religious leaders in the drafting process.

Certainly, the decree spelled out more clearly which religious activities are permissible: Article 4 provides for the freedom to conduct religious activities and worship in established venues, while Article 11 provides for the right to assemble for religious activities at established places of worship. Yet key provisions unnecessarily restrict religious activities: state approval is required to print religious literature, build religious facilities, travel abroad for training and meetings with co-religionists, and issue invitations to foreign co-religionists to visit Laos. Perhaps the most important restriction is the requirement that religious organisations register with the government. However, interestingly, the decree does not specify the consequences, if any, for groups that choose not to register. The contents of the decree directly contradict the central government's claim that religious freedom violations have been the work of uncontrolled local officials.

Still, most striking is how much the decree resembles state regulations in China and Vietnam. The relationship between Laos and

these two Communist states, particularly Vietnam, has indeed grown in recent years. Vietnamese influence in Laos is palpable. Exchanges between the two countries have not been confined to senior state officials: visitors to Vientiane will be impressed with the large number of business signs in Vietnamese. However, more troubling from the perspective of religious freedom is that Lao officials undergo political "training" in Vietnam. Vietnamese media reported in early 2004 that senior Lao officials receive "ideological" training at the Vietnamese Communist Party School. (For information on religious freedom in Vietnam, see F18News 2 February http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=242).

Yet Lao officials have not been the only ones learning from their Vietnamese and Chinese counterparts. Even Lao religious leaders have apparently been looking to these countries for lessons on how to manage their affairs in similar political conditions. According to a reliable source, one leader of the state-approved Lao Evangelical Church visited Vietnam and China on several occasions. (For information on religious freedom in China, see for example F18News 28 April http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=309). But, unlike the leaders of state-approved religious communities in China and Vietnam, Lao religious leaders have been willing to criticise their government for religious freedom violations and to spell out the difficulties they face in practising their faith.

All this shows that the religious freedom picture is complex. In the last few years, thanks to the efforts of proponents of dialogue and general international pressure, religious freedom conditions have improved in Laos - at least for Protestant Christians, the main targets of repression in recent years. However, the state's political agenda remains fundamentally hostile to the genuine exercise of religious freedom. This hostility, as manifested in Decree 92, means that "isolated" incidents of religious freedom violations seem set to continue.

A printer-friendly map of Laos is available from

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=laos>

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