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Laos to raise awareness about new law protecting Christian minority

In the capital and in the big cities, Christians can live their faith freely, but the situation is different in rural areas, where abuses and persecution are commonplace. A new law aims to promote a better understanding of the religious minority, often incorrectly associated with Western imperialism.

By Vientiane

AsiaNews (30.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2G68WDF> - In Laos Christians can practise their faith more or less freely in the capital Vientiane and in the larger cities, not so in rural areas where they face discrimination and persecution from other Laotians, often with the support of local authorities.

After decades of propaganda and abuse, the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary (Communist) Party has passed a law that strengthens the protection of the Christian minority, who represent about 2 per cent of the country's seven million people, mostly Buddhists.

In the past Laotian Christians, half of whom are Catholics, were forced to practise their faith in secret, fearing violence and retaliation, especially in the countryside.

Recently, Christian groups began to work with the Interior Ministry and the Lao Front for National Construction to bring local authorities up to date about a new law that came into effect last December that allows them to worship freely and peacefully.

According to Églises d'Asie, the new piece of legislation requires churches to obey all of the country's laws, rules and legislation, but it also gives their members some freedom to practise their faith.

Still, despite the law, officials in rural areas have continued to threaten and oppress Christians and treat them as second-class citizens, Laotian Christian groups lament.

The persecution is the product of a dominant mindset among majority Buddhists who view Christians as "traitors" who practice a "foreign" religion imported by missionaries who came from Europe or the United States in the past.

In its own propaganda, the ruling communist regime has also portrayed Christians as a tool to impose Western imperialism on the Asian country, a former French protectorate.

What is more, many Christians are ethnic Hmong, who still carry the stigma of working with the Americans during the Vietnam War (1955-1975).

Abuses include arrests. Last March in a village in the province of Savannakhet, the authorities jailed a clergyman for holding a religious service. He was not formally indicted nor any explanation was given for his detention.

By and large, Christians “living in rural areas were considered ‘bad elements’ by other residents and by village authorities,” a Christian told Radio Free Asia (RFA). “Many Christians were abused, re-educated, evicted from their villages, arrested, and jailed – mainly because the local authorities did not understand Christians,” he explained.

To remedy the situation, seminars and meetings have been organised. Thus “Now we hope that these meetings will improve understanding between the authorities and Christians,” the Christian added.

Such meetings were also held last week in Bokeo, Bolikhamxay and Savannakhet provinces.

At one meeting, “we explained the law to the representatives of local authorities,” said a Christian clergyman in Bolikhamxay near the border with Vietnam.

Hopefully, “these representatives will pass the information along to other local officials, including authorities in the villages” in order to promote mutual knowledge and understanding.

Persecution forces Laotian Christians to practice faith in secret

Christians face threats from other villagers as well as official intimidation in the communist nation.

By Vientiane

UCA News (17.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/342mrfd> - Christians in Laos continue to face various forms of harassment and discrimination, which has forced many of them, including Catholics, to practice their faith in secret, according to foreign Christian groups.

A recently taken photograph, published online on Sept. 14, shows nine young Christian men praying, with their hands clasped, inside a forest beside towering trees.

The Christians, who live in a rural area, feel it is necessary to hold their religious ceremonies in such circumstances because practicing their faith openly in their village could expose them to harassment from non-Christian locals, according to Open Doors International, a non-denominational mission that supports persecuted Christians in over 70 countries worldwide.

“Two months ago, these believers were threatened [when] other members of their village said they would kick them out of the community because of their faith,” the group says.

“So they can no longer meet to pray inside their village. But instead of giving up, they are finding other ways to meet as secretly as possible.”

The plight of these Christians is symptomatic of widespread prejudices against Christians in the communist nation of seven million where Christians account for around 2 percent of the population, with half of them believed to be Catholic.

Although Laos’ communist government nominally guarantees religious freedom for all citizens, in reality Christians are routinely shunned by locals and face harassment by officials. The regime recently enacted Decree No. 238 on Associations, which allows local

authorities to restrict the operations of civil and religious associations, including churches.

Other laws are also used to place restrictions on religious practices, including the holding of prayer services, the ordination of religious leaders, and the free movement of believers.

"The government uses all the administrative machinery down to the elders of villages to prevent people from becoming Christians or from punishing those who dare," some Laotian Christians were quoted as saying by a foreign Christian organization.

Christianity is often singled out for special restrictions because the faith has long been portrayed by official propaganda as an alien religion that was imported into the country by the missionaries of colonial powers, including the United States, whose war with Vietnam resulted in large-scale destruction of Laos during massive bombing campaigns aimed at uprooting communist guerrillas from the jungles.

A Christian villager recently told Radio Free Asia that he had been scolded by an official over his Christian faith. "You people believe in America's god," the official reportedly told the villager. "Don't you remember what America did to our country?"

Rights groups have documented numerous similar instances of alleged discrimination against local Christians. "Christianity is viewed as a North American religion or a tool of missions to undermine the Laotian regime," says The Voice of the Martyrs, a US-based Christian outreach mission.

"While house churches and church buildings do exist, the vast majority of them do not have a trained lead pastor. However, in most villages, church buildings are not allowed. If village leaders notice that a house church is growing, they will try to stop it," the mission adds.

Christians are often deprived of even basic rights, according to foreign rights groups and Christian organizations. If they are cheated in land or business deals by other locals, they often have no real recourse to justice as officials turn a blind eye to many injustices if they involve Christians, rights groups say.

"Christians generally have difficulties providing for themselves and their families, for they often cannot get jobs — most of which are available through the government," The Voice of the Martyrs says.

"Christians commonly are denied medical treatment, education and other social services. Arrests of believers frequently take place, resulting in detainments that average for up to a week," it explains.